SPECIAL TIME EDITION

The Muppets 70 YEARS

The Muppets

Funny, Wise, Beloved—Forever.

Jim Henson's Magic

—

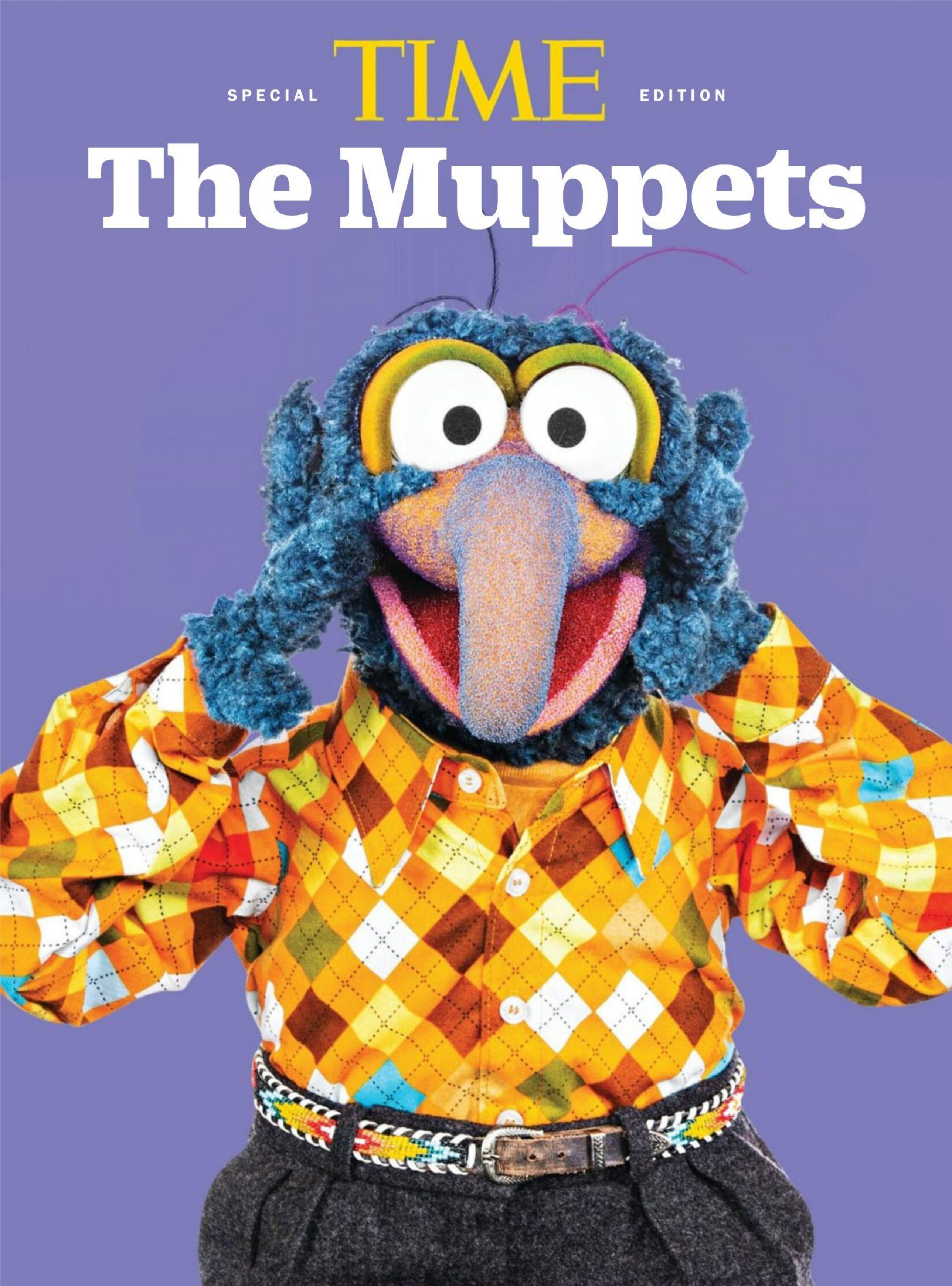
Characters Like No Others

—

The Story of the Songs

SPECIAL TIME EDITION

The Muppets



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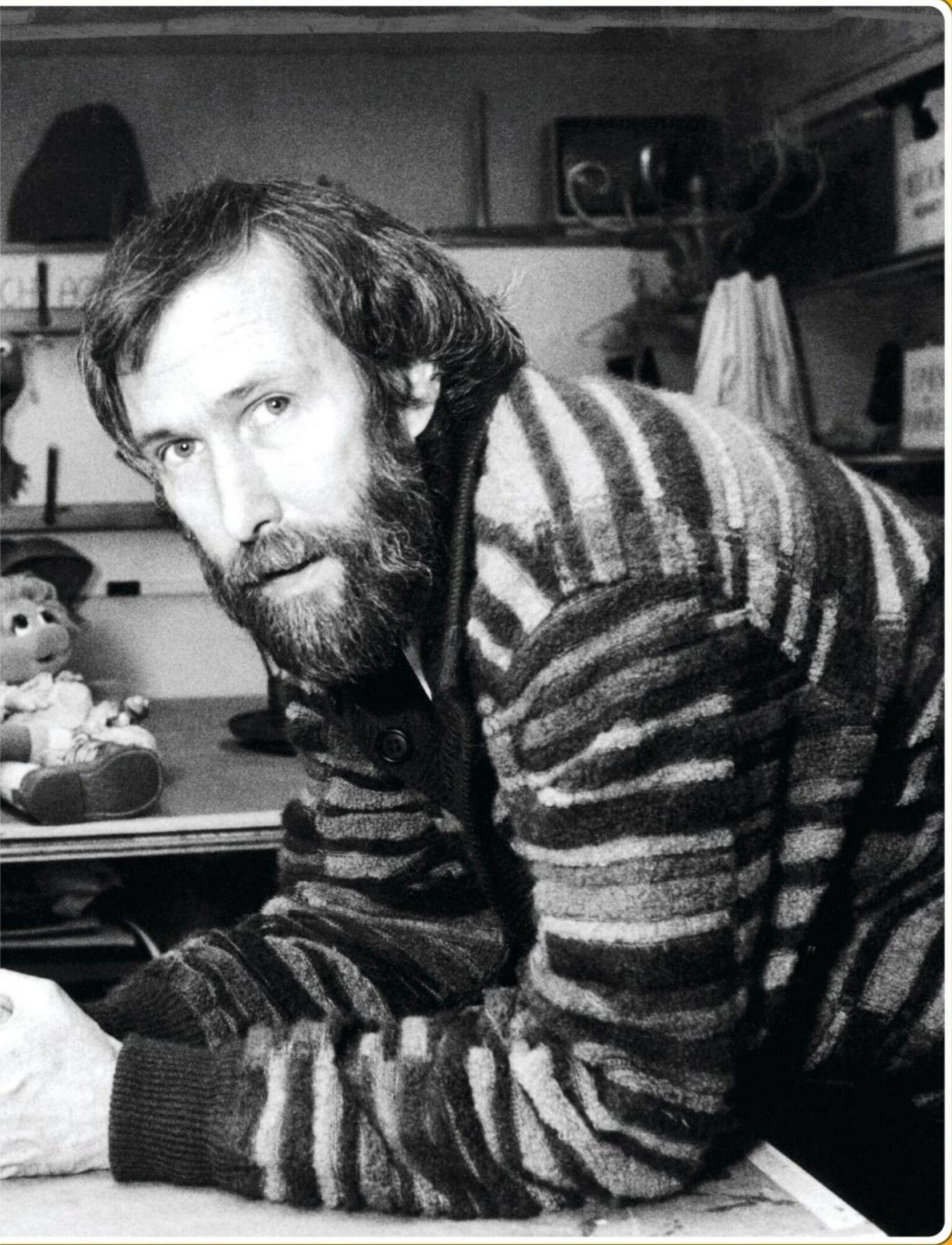
Jim Henson in New York at his East 69th Street office and workshop in 1984.



You Can Always Count on the Muppets

Since their earliest iterations, Jim Henson's puppets have brought viewers laughs, joy, and widsom.

BY GINA McINTIRE

ONCE UPON A TIME—SPRING 1978, to be exact—a frog and a bear wandered into a UK meadow looking to get back to nature. They weren't living, breathing animals but rather creatures made from foam rubber, felt, and fur, yet in the hands of master puppeteers Jim Henson and Frank Oz, they came alive, engaging in some playfully existential banter while enjoying their time in the great outdoors. "Have you ever seen a bear with a magenta nose?" Kermit the Frog asks his funny friend Fozzie Bear, attempting to prove his point, that the earnest comedian would be out of place amid a sloth of actual bears. "I do understand that I'm not a real bear," Fozzie replies. "But I'm a real puppet."

The archival footage of the famous characters dates back nearly 50 years—it was a camera test done to determine whether the puppets would feel believable when juxtaposed against real animals and locations for their then upcoming big-screen debut in 1979's *The Muppet Movie*. The answer, of course, was a resounding yes, though only a tiny fraction of that sense of realism had to do with how Fozzie looked while chatting up a curious cow.

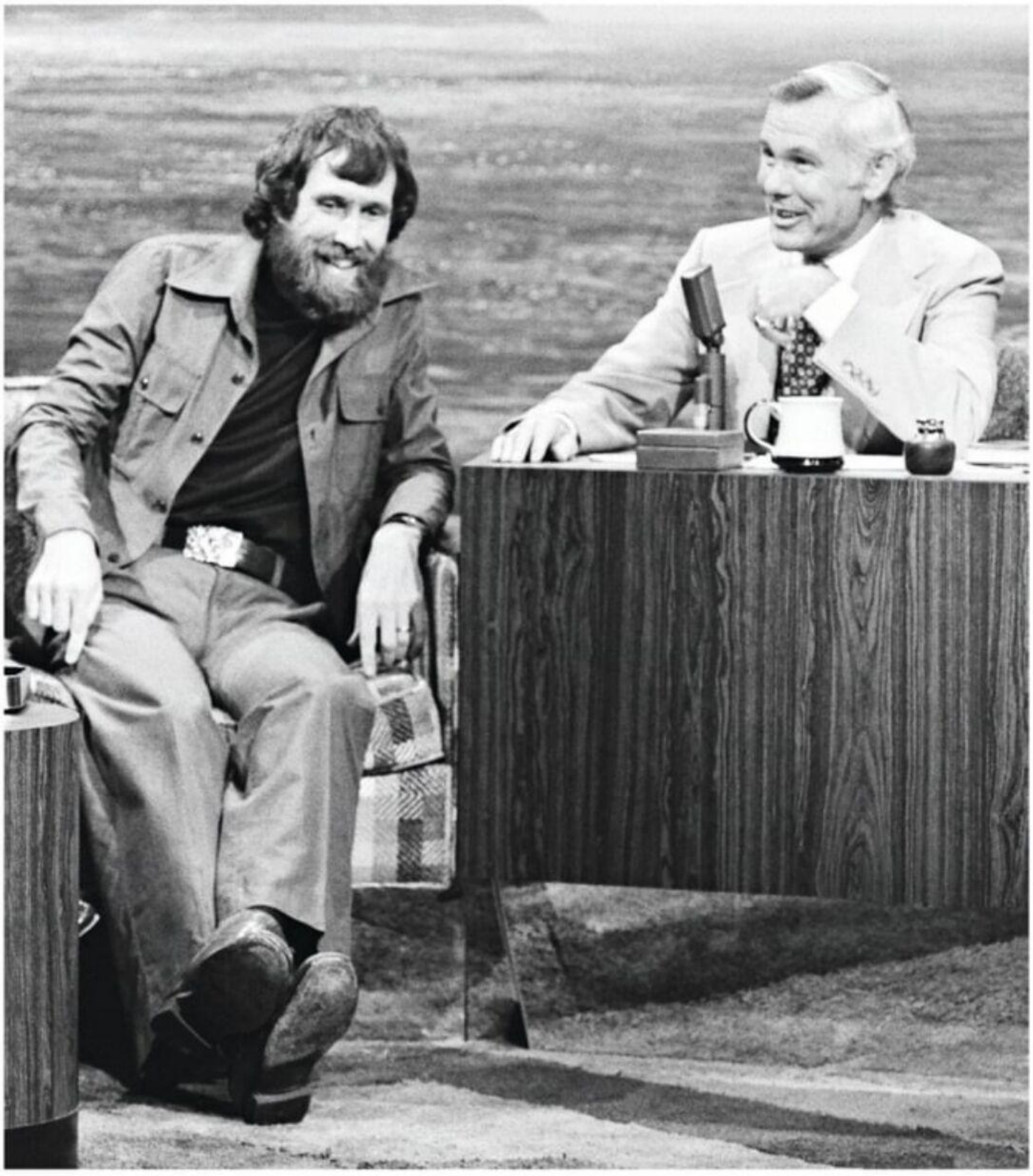
Instead, it was the genius of Henson and his team of gifted collaborators that made the characters feel so utterly real. They endowed their creations with humor, heart, empathy, compassion, a touch of "affectionate anarchy" (according to Frank Oz), and unparalleled comedic timing, transforming Kermit, Fozzie and the rest of the Muppet gang into larger-than-life figures occupying a rarefied position in the global cultural consciousness.

Indeed, even decades after Henson's death in 1990, the madcap menagerie of talking frogs, dogs, pigs, and bears remains internationally recognized and universally beloved—so much so that the original Kermit the Frog puppet, which Henson created in 1955, is now part of the Smithsonian's permanent collection, alongside George Washington's uniform and Abraham Lincoln's hat. "I would make the argument that Kermit has had as much influence on American history and culture as those other iconic objects," Ryan Lintelman, entertainment curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, told *Smithsonian* magazine in 2024.

Plenty of fictional characters and entertainment properties have had an outsize impact on popular culture, yet almost none spark the kind of overwhelming affection as the Muppets—in the same *Smithsonian* piece, Sunae Park Evans, the National Museum's senior costume conservator, notes that people are frequently moved to tears upon seeing Kermit. The Muppets' warmth, their charm, and their winning and imminently relatable personalities all contribute to their popularity, but there's also a certain ineffable quality that holds the key to their staying power. During the troupe's more than five decades in the spotlight, generations of fans have grown up with them, forging such strong parasocial relationships with the characters that they have essentially come to feel like close friends or even family members.

"He created a family of unforgettable characters with real feelings and real problems that audiences could identify with, that children could identify with and grown-ups could identify with," noted actress Candice Bergen in the 2015 PBS documentary *In Their Own Words—Jim Henson*.

The daughter of Henson's idol, ventriloquist and comedian Edgar Bergen, and a *Muppet Show* guest herself, Candice was uniquely qualified to speak to



From left: Henson on The Tonight Show *with Johnny Carson in 1975; in the 1970s, his staff of designers, puppet builders, and puppeteers made* Sesame Street, The Muppet Show, *and other productions.*

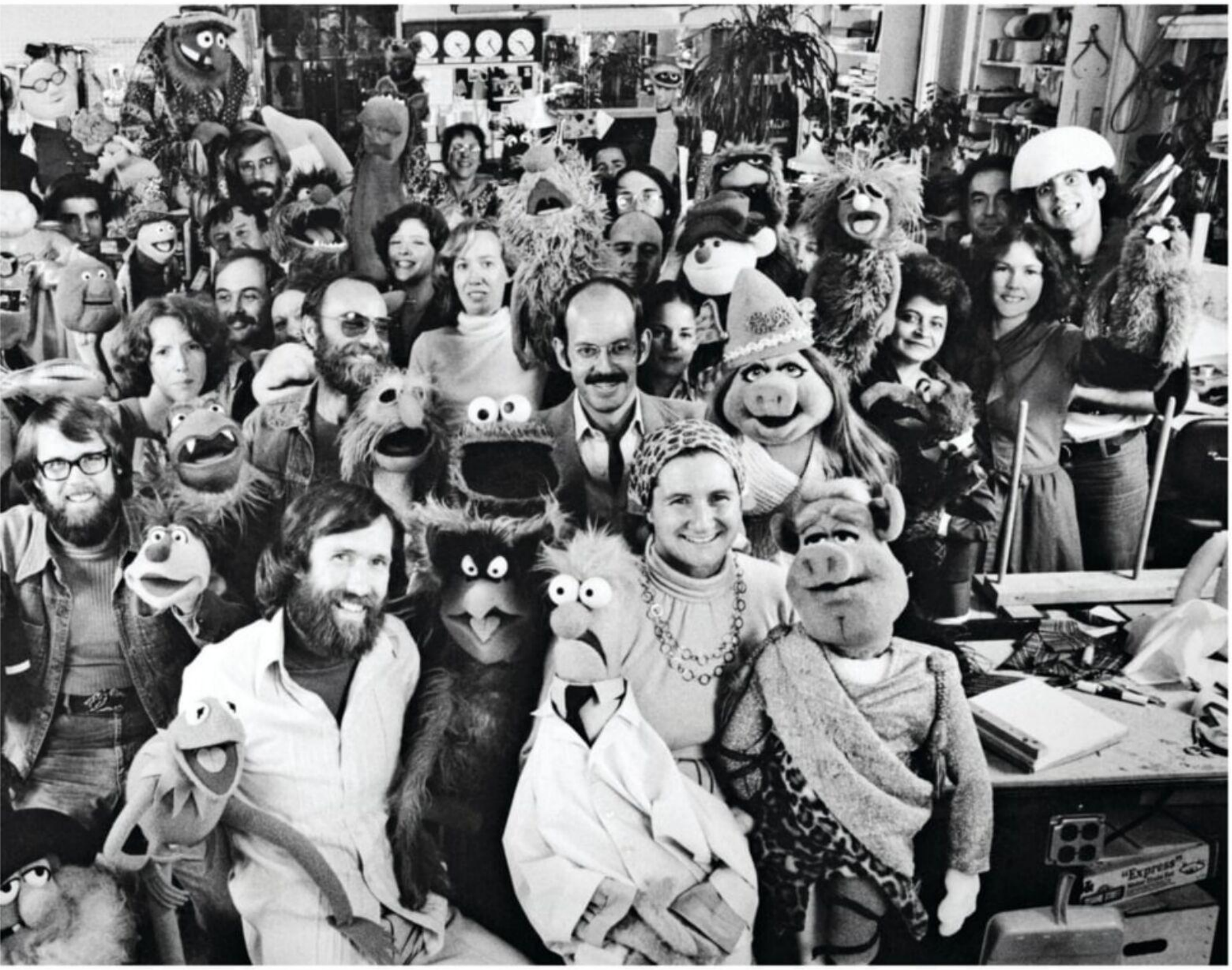
the power of puppets and weigh in on Henson's towering legacy.

WHEN *SESAME STREET* PREMIERED ON NOVEMBER 10, 1969, millions of children fell in love with the Muppets who lived there (during the series' first season, 7 million children watched each day), and those feelings have never entirely died away. Surprisingly, Henson had had reservations about allowing his colorful characters to come and play on the PBS preschool program.

Ever since he'd first introduced the Muppets on the short-form TV series *Sam and Friends* in 1955, Henson had viewed them as appealing to adults, and he'd spent years battling the perception that puppets were only suitable to entertain children. Ultimately, though, Henson was won over by *Sesame Street*'s ambition to educate its viewers while rooting them in the values of inclusion, kindness, and empathy, and to keep them laughing with mirthful sketches and songs.

For children watching the Muppets, the characters were just as real as the human cast members, and they often faced the same sorts of challenges that the audience faced. Sketches involving the Muppet characters never shied away from exploring subjects that might have been considered too complex for their most youthful fans.

When Kermit performed "Bein' Green" for the first time in 1970, children who loved the quirky little frog might not have fully understood the song's more profound observations about the importance of self-acceptance, but they could still appreciate the beautiful simplicity of the music and the poetry



of the lyrics: "When green is all there is to be/It could make you wonder why/But why wonder?"

Written by the show's musical director, Joe Raposo, "Bein' Green" took on a life of its own when R&B legend Ray Charles released a cover version in 1975, evidence that something that began with the Muppets could reel in a wide swath of the public thanks to a sincere message of empowerment and uplift.

"Late one night, I turned on [the TV], and he was singing 'It's Not That Easy Bein' Green,' Ray Charles," recalled *Sesame Street* performer Bob McGrath in an interview with the Television Academy Foundation. "All of a sudden, it just took on another whole dimension that I'd never thought of. I've since used it in concert many times. You can look in the audience and just see everyone sort of nodding their head, like, yes, I know where Kermit's coming from."

IF *SESAME STREET* HELPED THE MUPPETS GAIN A foothold in pop culture, *The Muppet Show* made them a full-fledged prime time sensation. Premiering September 5, 1976, the syndicated series was conceived as a 30-minute variety show featuring musical numbers and comedy sketches and with a celebrity guest each week—though the Muppets were the true stars. In addition to Henson's lovable Everyfrog, the ensemble included diva Miss Piggy, pianist Rowlf the Dog, comedian Fozzie Bear, gofer Scooter, and such entertaining oddballs as daredevil Gonzo and Lew Zealand and his boomerang fish. Criticizing the onstage shenanigans from their balcony roost were curmudgeons Statler and Waldorf.

True to Henson's contention, *The Muppet Show* found favor across every demographic, growing in reach to air in more than 100 countries by its third

season, playing to at least 235 million viewers weekly before ending its run in 1981.

Writing for TIME in 1978, journalist John Skow posited a deeper reason for why Henson's brainchild resonated so strongly with grown-ups and kids: "Kermit, rueful and dithered, frees a part of our own natures so absurd and defenseless that we would never let a human actor hold it in his hands," Skow wrote. "What these puppets mean to the millions of people who have watched them is almost embarrassing to express, because the feeling they evoke is nothing less than love."

The 1979 release of *The Muppet Movie,* a semi-autobiographical tale about a ragtag bunch of would-be entertainers journeying to Hollywood and making it big, further cemented the love that Muppet fans felt toward the characters. Further success and many more milestones followed: Kermit the Frog guest-hosting *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson; *The Muppet Movie* earning two Academy Award nominations; merchandising contracts, movie sequels, TV specials, books, games, and other media ventures. The Muppets were everywhere. Yet the magical characters never wore out their welcome.

Each time they resurfaced for a new turn in the spotlight, it was like being reunited with long-lost friends who haven't aged a day and are still as funny and prone to foibles as they've always been. "The secret of the Muppets is they're not very good at what they do," *Ted Lasso* actor and Muppets superfan Brett Goldstein said during an interview with Brené Brown for her *Unlocking Us* podcast. "Like, Kermit's not a great host. Fozzie is not a good comedian. Miss Piggy is not a great.... None of them are actually good at it, but they [really] love it. And they're like a family, and they like putting on a show, and they have joy, and because of the joy, it doesn't matter that they're not good at it."

Goldstein, along with John Oliver and Jason Segel, belongs to a generation of comedians, writers, and performers who cite the Muppets as a significant creative influence and who exhibit a reverence for the characters bordering on religious fervor. During the read-through of Segel's script for 2011's *The Muppets,* which starred Segel and the gang in an adventure that pitted them against a greedy oil mogul, the actor admits that he cried hearing puppeteer Steve Whitmire performing Kermit's lines.

"It wasn't like a burst-out kind of crying," Segel told the Huffington Post. "It was much more embarrassing than that. It was like the slow cry where you're trying super hard not to let anyone know you're about to cry, so you're pursing your lips, but they're quivering. Next thing I knew, there were

The Muppets took over Good Morning America *in 2011. Opposite: In 2012, the gang received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.*

tears streaming down my face, and there was nothing I could do to hide it."

Segel's behavior is easy to understand, considering how rare it is to interact with a fictional character you loved as a child, let alone one who remains fixed in your imagination as a source of joy, comfort, and comedy. (Having been lucky enough to have interviewed Kermit for the *Los Angeles Times* many years ago, I can attest to feeling quite starstruck in his presence.) Thanks to the artistry of the puppeteers who manipulate them, it's easy to forget that the Muppets can't walk, talk, or crack jokes without the assistance of a human.

Which goes a long way toward explaining why the Muppets remain such a well-loved presence today, turning up in all sorts of surprising places. Kermit, decked out in university finery, delivered the 2025 commencement address at Henson's alma mater, the University of Maryland.

He offered the graduates a message exemplifying the values that the Muppets embody: positivity, generosity, friendship, resilience, and, of course, humor. "Now, there is no guarantee that the show is always good or that it'll go off without a hitch or it doesn't have its, uh, hecklers," Kermit said. "Yeah. But the show must go on. And, if you're with your people, you won't have to do it alone. Because life is not a solo act. No, it's not. It's a big, messy, delightful ensemble piece, especially when you're with your people."

Thank goodness that for all of us, the Muppets will always be our people. □

Meet the Muppets

Who's who in the marvelous medley.

BY COURTNEY MIFSUD INTREGLIA

The Main Characters

These series mainstays have been part of the ensemble since the very beginning. Some have been making media appearances since the 1950s, while the rest joined the party when *The Muppet Show* debuted in 1976.

Kermit the Frog

Although he likes to claim that he was born in a swamp with thousands of tadpole siblings, Kermit's roots actually trace back to the University of Maryland. It was there that a home economics student named Jim Henson glued halved table-tennis balls onto his mother's turquoise felt coat. When Henson first premiered the character of Kermit on *Sam and Friends* in 1955, he described him as "kind of easygoing, very likable . . . sometimes slightly a wise guy." Kermit went on to become the star and host of *The Muppet Show* and had a major role on *Sesame Street.* He's starred in nearly every Muppets production and has made appearances on programs such as *30 Rock* and *The Masked Singer.* Kermit's song "The Rainbow Connection" was nominated for an Academy Award, as was "The First Time It Happens" from *The Great Muppet Caper.*

Miss Piggy

The porcine prima donna is the real face of the Muppets, and there's no convincing her otherwise. Between her perpetual on again/off again relationship with Kermit and her competence in karate, Miss Piggy is a force of nature who has been a main character for half a century. She first appeared as "Piggy Lee" in a 1974 television variety special, *Herb Alpert and the TJB.* In 1979, to celebrate *The Muppet Movie, People* magazine published a tongue-in-cheek cover story with Miss Piggy. "My beauty," she murmurs breathily to the reporter, "is my curse!" The magazine world apparently struck a chord with her, because in 2011's *The Muppets,* Miss Piggy is the editor of *French Vogue.* She is consistently ranked among the greatest TV stars and characters of all time, and she received a Sackler Center First Award in 2015 for blazing feminist trails with such humor and determination.

Fozzie Bear

He might technically be one of the world's worst stand-up comedians, but Fozzie Bear has brought plenty of laughs (intentionally or not) since his 1976 *Muppet Show* debut. During a monologue, he often punctuates his punchlines with his catchphrase, "Wocka wocka wocka!" Frank Oz, who played the character for nearly 30 years, described Fozzie as "desperately insecure" and said the bear considers his relationship with Kermit foundational to his identity. While Fozzie may not be the most proficient comic, he puts his talents to good use behind the scenes. The friendly bear appears in sketches with guest stars Avery Schreiber and Nancy Walker. In Walker's episode, Kermit calls in sick, and Fozzie takes the helm as the episode's host. After a mishap-filled show, Fozzie receives an encouraging letter from none other than Walker (whose name he forgot during the initial introductions): "Dear Fozzie, I just want to tell you what a pleasure it was to work with you on your show. You're really terrific. The frog's been holding you back."

Scooter

If you needed someone to run an errand on *The Muppet Show* set, Scooter was likely your

guy. The series' gofer became a fixture of backstage plotlines. Originally designed to be a nepo-baby antagonist, Scooter only held his position because his rich uncle J. P. Grosse owned the theatre. Over time, Scooter's demanding nature was gradually discarded, and he became good pals with Kermit and the cast. Scooter once stepped in to host the show when Kermit accidentally got on an in-service train and found himself in Pittsburgh.

Gonzo

Whether you know him as "The Great Gonzo" or "Gonzo the Great," the *Muppet Show* daredevil shocks and awes with his dangerous and ill-advised stunts. Gonzo made his first appearance in the 1970 special *The Great Santa Claus Switch* as the "Cigar Box Frackle" and began on *The Muppet Show* as a minor player. He evolved into one of the primary characters, and he has been in every Muppets film to date. With his bug eyes, lengthy snout, and blue fur, his identity varies, depending whom you ask. Kermit has called him a turkey, and Gonzo himself identifies as "whatever." The matter was resolved in *Muppets from Space* (1999), when Gonzo turned out to have been an alien all along.

The Swedish Chef

Created as a parody of real-life television chefs, the mustachioed Muppet is nearly always found in the kitchen, sputterring his unintelligible "Børk! Børk! Børk!" catchphrase before hurling cooking utensils over his shoulder to crash into the crockery behind him. It's not a great idea to attempt any of this chef's recipes, as he'll wield tennis rackets and firearms instead of spatulas and ladles. He is one of the few Muppets to ever thwart Miss Piggy's martial arts aggression: In a 1980 episode, he successfully blocked her signature karate chop with a pot lid.

Statler and Waldorf

Cantankerous and balcony-bound, this elderly duo hold some testy opinions of their fellow *Muppet Show* cast members. Statler (right) and Waldorf (left) heckle the show from their stage-left balcony box, and one is rarely seen without the other. If you ask them why they attended each show if they despised the program so much, even they couldn't tell you. According to one version of "The Muppet Show Theme," Waldorf asks, "Why do we always come here?" to which Statler replies, "I guess we'll never know."

Rowlf the Dog

This floppy-eared furball was the first Muppet (including Kermit) to reach national stardom, appearing regularly as the popular sidekick on *The Jimmy Dean Show* from 1963 to 1966. Rowlf's first gig was in 1962, as a spokesdog in a series of Purina Dog Chow commercials aired in Canada. The sweet-natured pup joined *The Muppet Show* in 1976 as the program's pianist, and he starred in the recurring medical- drama parody "Veterinarian's Hospital" as a wisecracking doctor.

"WHY DOES EVERYONE ALWAYS BLAME DOGS?"

—Rowlf the Dog,
The Muppets Take Manhattan

“THIS IS MUPPET LABS, AND I AM TICKLED PINK TO ANNOUNCE THE SOLUTION TO BANANA PROBLEMS.”

—Dr. Bunsen Honeydew

Dr. Bunsen Honeydew

Some Muppet names have origins shrouded in mystery, with rumors and myths saturating the discourse. Others, though, are pretty easy to discern. This bald, yellow- green-skinned scientist is named after Robert Bunsen, for whom the Bunsen burner was named, and honeydew melon, that fruit of a similar hue. The show's resident scientist works alongside his stressed-out assistant, Beaker, and is always showing off his latest discovery or invention. Some highlights include his All-Purpose Tenderizer (which sundered plates and utensils along with the meat), a Gorilla Detector, and an Exploding Hat.

Beaker

As Muppet Labs' perpetual victim, Beaker should really look into some workplace compensation. The wiry assistant has been zapped, punched, inflated, cloned, and turned invisible. Plus, the gauntlet of harrowing incidents has left Beaker chronically anxious. He might just be too scared to speak, as Beaker only communicates using "mee-mee-mee" sounds (spelled "meep" in merchandise), though on rare occasions he's been able to mutter single-word answers.

Sam Eagle

If any Muppet can keep the peace on the program's set, it's Sam Eagle. Intensely patriotic and no-nonsense, Sam loves all things U.S.A. and is constantly appalled by the antics of his fellow cast members. Sam has appeared in every Muppets film, mostly as himself, but in a few standouts he lends his intense discipline to other figures: head schoolmaster in *The Muppet Christmas Carol,* Samuel Arrow in *Muppet Treasure Island,* and a CIA agent in *Muppets Most Wanted.* In the Disney-era show *The Muppets* (2015), Sam acts as an ABC executive tasked with enforcing broadcast standards and best practices.

Walter

Not only did Disney reboot the Muppets franchise with a new film—2011's *The Muppets*—it also added a new felted friend to the greater Muppets

universe. Walter, introduced as the roommate of Jason Segel's Gary, is a twenty-something human Muppet who might just be the biggest fan of the franchise ever. "Walter has a bit of a self-confidence issue because he's the only person like him that he's seen, aside from the Muppets," Segel explained to *Entertainment Weekly* in 2011. "His dream is to meet the Muppets and be around people who are like him." After that film, Walter appeared in other productions, notably *Muppets Most Wanted* (2014), *Muppets Now* (2020), and *Muppets Haunted Mansion* (2021).

Pepé the King Prawn

The Swedish Chef isn't the only culinary expert in the Muppet universe. Pepino Rodrigo Serrano Gonzales—otherwise known as Pepé the King Prawn—ventured to Hollywood as a chef from Madrid to pursue a career in show business. Pepé has a fiery temper. The four-armed self-proclaimed lothario will lash out at anyone bold enough to call him a "shrimp." When he was first introduced, his character often played on Hispanic stereotypes. Unlike many of the mainstays described here, Pepé's roots come much later than *The Muppet Show.* The crustacean debuted in 1996 on the TV series *Muppets Tonight* with Seymour the Elephant.

Camilla the Chicken

While Kermit and Miss Piggy usually come to mind as the quintessential Muppets romance, Gonzo and his great love, Camilla, might give them a run for their money. Camilla was first introduced in episode 318 of *The Muppet Show,* when Gonzo visits the hen's dressing room for their first date. But Camilla has hay fever, and the flowers Gonzo brought her only make matters worse. The eager alien then offers a ballad no poultry could resist: "Camilla…you're prettier by far than Godzilla…" Their on-screen romance has continued through the decades, and even younger Gonzo knew the love that awaited him: In *Muppet Babies* (1984), Camilla is a rag doll that sometimes comes to life in Baby Gonzo's imagination.

Rizzo the Rat

The pint-size character first appeared during the cold open of episode 418 of *The Muppet Show,* as one of a group of rats following guest star Christopher Reeve around backstage. "Gee, most stars get groupies," Reeve says to the audience. "I get rats." Rizzo remained a scene-stealing background rodent through the final season, and in 1992 he teamed up with Gonzo the Great to narrate *The Muppet Christmas Carol.* After his holiday debut, Rizzo went on to star in feature films and TV specials, including *Muppet Treasure Island, Muppets from Space, Muppets Tonight,* and *The Muppets' Wizard of Oz.*

“THERE ARE TWO THINGS IN THIS LIFE I HATE: HEIGHTS, AND JUMPING FROM THEM.”

—Rizzo the Rat,
The Muppet Christmas Carol

The Band

When it comes to Muppets music, there's no more prominent ensemble than Dr. Teeth and the Electric Mayhem (also known simply as the Electric Mayhem). Introduced in the show's 1975 pilot, the six-member rock band includes some serious talent.

Animal

The Electric Mayhem's drummer is so feral that—according to the *Muppet Show* pilot, at least—he needs to be chained in a basement cell when not on stage performing. Frank Oz, who played Animal for 25 years, summed him up in five words: sleep, food, drums, pain, and sex (he has a penchant for chasing women). Animal often demonstrates that two of those principles—food and drums—are quite easy to mix up.

Floyd Pepper

Beyond being part of the Electric Mayhem as its bassist, the purple-hued Floyd has a difficult task: keeping Animal under control, or at least as much as possible. Disney's *The Muppets Mayhem* (2023) expands a bit on his character: The episode "Exile on Main Street" reveals that Floyd has been Animal's guardian since Animal was left on his doorstep as an infant. Floyd's clothing and last name are clear references to the Beatles album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.*

Zoot

The balding, cerulean sax player is, according to Dave Goelz, who performs him, "just a 50-year-old burnt-out musician." Zoot appears in many episodes of *The Muppet Show,* and to date Goelz has played him exclusively, with the exception of one episode of *The Jim Henson Hour.* This old soul is known for blowing short notes of music at a time and famously closing out "The Muppet Show Theme" during the program's end credits.

Lips

For the first four seasons, Electric Mayhem was made up of just five members: Dr. Teeth, Animal, Floyd Pepper, Janice, and Zoot. It wasn't until Season 5, the show's final season, that Lips joined the band on trumpet. According to legend, he earned his nickname one cold day in elementary school, when his lips got stuck to his trumpet while he was practicing outdoors.

Janice

As the only girl in the group, flower child Janice has plump pink lips, voluminous lashes, and lengthy blond locks. Electric Mayhem's lead guitarist also portrays Nurse Janice in the recurring sketch "Veterinarian's Hospital." Janice has many musical talents besides the guitar: She plays the trumpet, trombone and tambourine, and she sings.

Dr. Teeth

He's the lead singer and keyboardist, so it makes sense that his name precedes the band's. Ahead of the group's 1975 debut, Teeth made the late-night rounds, appearing on *The Tonight Show* and *The Mike Douglas Show.* Almost every member of the Electric Mayhem resembles or takes inspiration from real-life musicians, and Dr. Teeth is based on New Orleans musician Dr. John. *The Muppets Mayhem* introduced some new Teeth lore: Dr. Teeth is also an accredited dentist. His full name is Gerald Teeth Jr., DDS.

Supporting Characters

These recurring Muppets might not have the star power of Kermit or Miss Piggy, but they're delightful all the same. Here are our favorite felted friends who get less screen time than the others but make up for it with unforgettable laughs.

Robin the Frog

Kind, clever, and pint-size, Kermit's young nephew, Robin, bears a striking resemblance to the Muppets frontman. Robin made his TV debut before many of the other Muppets, in the 1971 television special *The Frog Prince,* as the prince turned frog. He sang in several episodes of *The Muppet Show* and was officially introduced as Kermit's relative in 1977, during the show's second season. Robin took on his most prominent role in 1992 as Tiny Tim in *The Muppet Christmas Carol.*

Uncle Deadly

When "The Phantom of the Muppet Show" (otherwise known as Uncle Deadly) terrorized the cast in episode 121, the world met a sinister-looking reptillian who would soon fade from prominence. Disney reintroduced Deadly in the 2011 film *The Muppets* as villain Tex Richman's second in command. Deadly takes on a much less sinister role in the 2015 ABC series, as Miss Piggy's wardrobe manager. And, fittingly, Uncle Deadly's ghostly visage appears in *Muppets Haunted Mansion.*

Beauregard

Not only does the Muppet Theater's dimwitted janitor (attempt to) keep the place clean, he lugs anvils and pianos, works as a stagehand, and has even served as Rat President and an honorary rodent. Beau's most notable performance is as a taxi driver in 1981's *The Great Muppet Caper,* when he drives Kermit, Fozzie, and Gonzo around London to the Happiness Hotel. When Kermit says they'll catch the thieves red-handed, Bo asks, "What color are their hands now?"

Lew Zealand

Purely defined by his one-note act, Zealand describes his fish throwing talents as "I throw them away, and they come back to me!" The boomerang fish-thrower's name is a simple pun that has nothing to do with the character's actions or appearance. Beyond his regular *Muppet Show* stints, Zealand provides the gang with paper towels during a heist in *The Great Muppet Caper,* and he played one of the merry men in the Muppet adaptation of *Robin Hood.*

Newsman

Unlike Lew Zealand, Newsman's name is very much tied to his identity. He's a man-like puppet who anchors "Muppet News Flash." The journalist suffers a nasty string of bad luck throughout the show, with wrecking balls crashing into the set, electric sledgehammer attacks, and a cow plummeting onto his person. During the credits of 2011's *The Muppets,* he appears as a telethon operator and makes announcements about the rebooted Muppets following their grand finale.

Crazy Harry

If something blows up on the *Muppet Show* set, chances are that a disheveled, cackling figure is nearby. Crazy Harry, the program's pyrotechnic's expert, delights in causing chaos at the slightest mention of an explosion, following up with "Did somebody say bang?" Besides his one-note joke, Harry largely did not have any speaking roles throughout the franchise, though he did play the triangle bell in the Muppet Orchestra for the opening and closing on the show's first season.

Link Hogthrob

This pin-headed, cleft-chinned porker debuted in 1977 as part of the "Pigs in Space" sketches, as captain of the *USS Swinetrek.* Beyond the space-related episodes, Hogthrob appeared in behind-the-scenes bits and appeared as the police chief in the recurring "Bear on Patrol" sketches. In one beloved sketch, English actor Peter Sellers, as a crazed German masseur, attempts to give Hogthrob a massage. Sellers ties up Hogthrob's arms and legs, leaving the poor pig in a knot.

Sweetums

The hulking, menacing ogre first appeared in 1971's *The Frog Prince* TV special alongside the cunning witch Taminella Grinderfall. He was also on Cher's 1975 variety show: Sweetums accompanied the singer on the Beatles song "Something." But the most beloved Sweetums part is probably in 1979's *The Muppet Movie.* After getting separated from the crew for most of the film, he bursts through the screen at the end, declaring, "I just knew I'd catch up to you guys!"

Bobo the Bear

When it comes to Muppet bears, Fozzie gets the lion's share of the attention. But Bobo, the bumbling security guard on the *Muppets Tonight* set, deserves some recognition, too. Throughout many of his film appearances, including *Muppets from Space* and 2011's *The Muppets,* Bobo plays the well-meaning, suit-clad assistant to the villain, who undercuts their menacing nature. Perhaps Bobo's most beloved appearance is when he attempted to woo Cindy Crawford in 1996.

Marvin Suggs

Banging on round tufts of fluff called a Muppaphone, Marvin Suggs is a recurring musical act who debuted on *The Muppet Show* in 1976, playing "Lady of Spain." When guest host Lesley Ann Warren accuses Suggs of being cruel for hitting live creatures, Marvin retorts: "Of course they are alive! You cannot make music by hitting dead creatures!" Decades later, in *Muppets Haunted Mansion,* Suggs proves his theory wrong, using a set of human skulls as a Muppaphone.

Pops

The elderly stage doorman was first introduced during *The Muppet Show*'s fifth season. Pops has a delightful bit where he is blissfully unaware of the celebrity status of the show's many guest stars, greeting them with a twangy "Who're you?" when they arrive on set. In *The Great Muppet Caper,* Pops' biggest film role, he advises Kermit and company on the several ways they can pay for their stay at the hotel: "A. credit card, B. cash, C. sneak out in the middle of the night."

want as much flexibility with the expressions possible! The beauty of Kermit is how much otional range one can achieve with the hand.

"The Magic Triangle"

Careful placement of the eyes in relation to the nose and mouth is critical!

Sketches on display at the Jim Henson Gallery at the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta.

Too SMALL FOR AN HP HEAD

ELASTIC THRU WOODEN DOWEL EMBEDDED IN SCOT

WOODEN DOWEL ELASTIC

LAS 3 FLOATING

SPRING RIBS

Gaffer the Cat's insides

-simple joints
-add just enough tail weight to keep movement real

"Beautiful Day" Monster
do we want a real noisemaker?
LEON "DOCTOR" ELTON JOHN
HAT - NARROW BRIMMED BABY BLUE BEAVER WITH SILK BANDS AND IRIDESCENT PLUME.
EXTRAVAGANTLY FEATHERED VEST
LACE AT NECK & CUFFS
SEQUINED CUFFS AND SASH.
OVERSIZED CUFFS CONTAIN TELESCOPING ARMS & LOTS OF EXTRA LACE

CHAPTER

ONE

Imagining FUN

Jim Henson believed that life should be joyous, fun, and fulfilling. From practicing puppetry in college to building a thriving Muppets workshop, his life's work embodied that.

Late Night, Broadway, and Weird Ideas: Creating the Muppets

How a young puppeteer found his footing and created a global phenomenon.

BY JACOB KLEINMAN

MISS PIGGY WAS NEVER SUPposed to be a star. The flamboyant pork chop originally appeared as a nameless background dancer in a 1974 collaboration between the Muppets and American trumpeter Herb Alpert. (Her designer named the character Miss Piggy Lee in a clever nod to the multitalented singer Peggy Lee.) When *The Muppet Show* premiered soon afterward, Piggy was still a background player getting passed between performers, including Muppets mainstay Frank Oz. Then, one fateful day, everything changed.

"I was working as Miss Piggy with Jim, who was doing Kermit, and the script called for her to slap him," Oz recounted in an interview with Brian Jay Jones for his book *Jim Henson: The Biography*. "Instead of a slap, I gave him a funny karate hit. Somehow, that hit crystallized her character for me — the coyness hiding the aggression."

That unexpected karate chop—and the accompanying "Hi-YA!"—brought down the house. Everyone on set stopped in their tracks before demanding that Oz do it again the next time he performed Miss Piggy. He gradually took over the character full time, and she quickly became an international sensation. "Piggy is born in the almost literal explosion of this karate chop," Jones says.

The story of Miss Piggy's first break might seem like lightning in a bottle, a once-in-a-lifetime stroke of genius that most people will never experience. But for the Muppets, it was just another workday. From their humble beginnings as lip-syncing entertainers on local network television, the Muppets' ultimate success was the result of creativity, improvisation, teamwork, and a rotating ensemble both behind and in front of the camera.

With Jim Henson and his go-to character Kermit the Frog at their center, the Muppets conquered the world and proved that puppets were more than just children's entertainment. But before any of that could happen, Henson would have to find his way to puppetry in the first place.

Henson's Early Life

"When I was a kid, I never saw a puppet show," Henson once told biographer Christopher Finch. "I never played with puppets or had any interest in

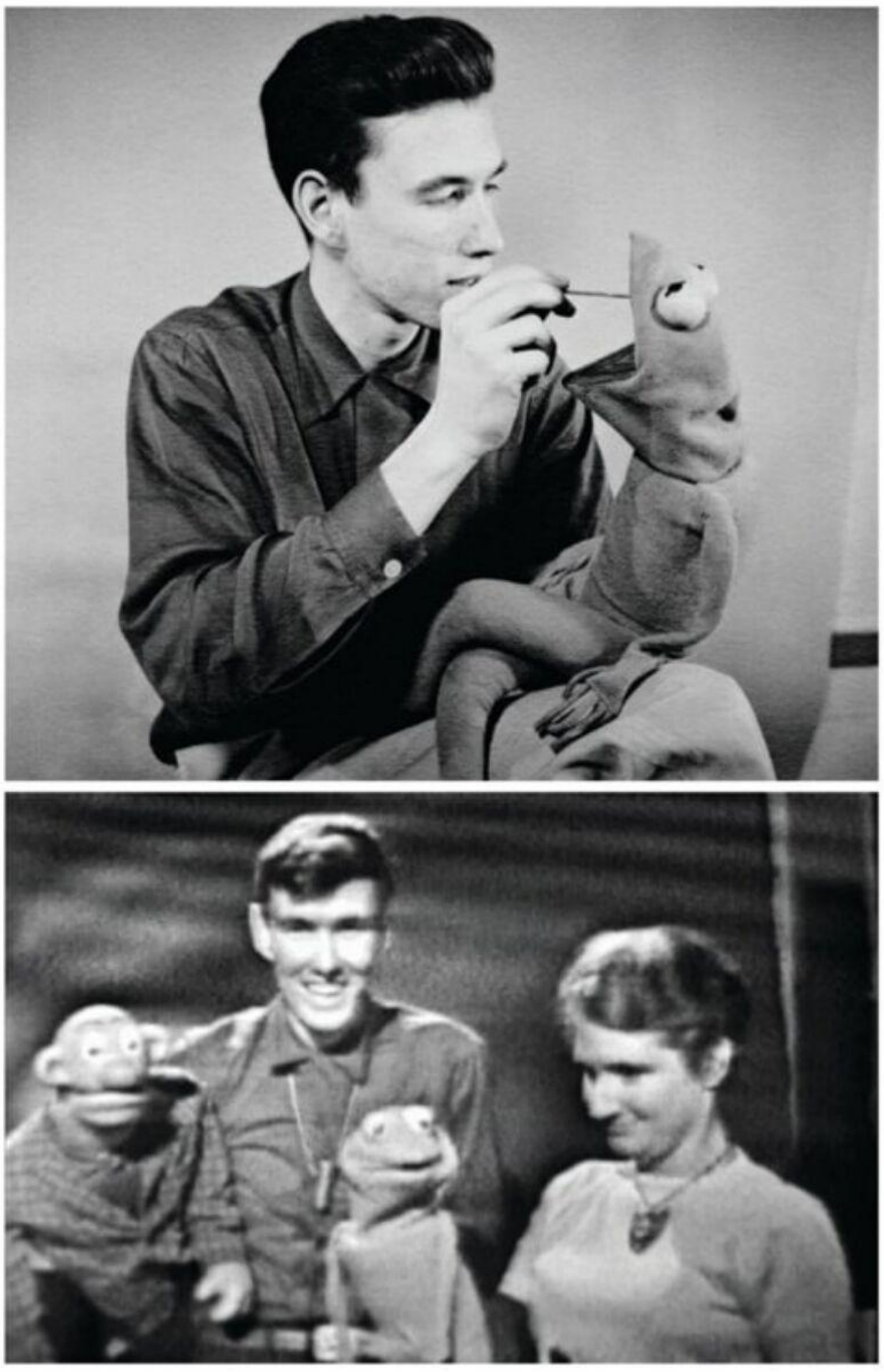
them. It was just a means to an end."

Jim Henson was born in Mississippi in 1936, where he was raised as a Christian Scientist. (As a teenager, his mother, Betty, refused to buy medicine to treat his severe acne due to her religious beliefs, and Jim grew a thick beard as soon as he could to cover the resulting acne scars on his face.) His father, Paul, worked as an agronomist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture and moved the family to Maryland in 1938. Henson's maternal grandmother, Sarah "Dear" Brown, taught him arts and crafts.

As a child, Henson was obsessed with popular culture. The family moved back to Mississippi after Jim finished first grade, and he spent his Saturdays at a local movie theater called the Temple, where he watched everything from cowboy movies and comedies to serials and cartoons. He also listened to the radio, which, ironically, may have been his first introduction to puppetry, through the popular ventriloquist Edgar Bergen. With just the audio to experience, a young Henson imagined each voice Bergen created as a distinct and real person. "I wasn't thinking of any of those people as puppets," Henson later told the *New York Times*. "They were human to me."

But nothing could have prepared Henson for the arrival of the television. As a teenager in the 1950s, he begged his parents to buy a TV set, and he was instantly obsessed with it. "Jim was a gadget guy," Jones says. "He loved that what you were watching was happening somewhere else in real time. He watched all the TV he could."

From that moment on, Henson's goal in life was clear. He wanted to work in television. At the time, puppets had nothing to do with it. Henson could draw well and build things, thanks to the influence of his grandmother. He figured he'd eventually get a job designing sets on a TV show, or something similar. "He just wanted so badly to be part of what was happening in television. He was fascinated by its creative potential," says Barbara Miller, deputy director for curatorial affairs at the Museum of the Moving Image in Queens, New York, which hosts a permanent Jim Henson exhibit and has become a hub for Muppets screenings and events.



Before he had even graduated from high school in Maryland—the family had moved back to the Washington, D.C., area in 1948—Henson got his wish. In the spring of 1954, he heard that the local CBS affiliate was looking for young people to work marionettes for a local show. So he went to the library and found a couple of books on puppetry. Less than two weeks later, Henson and a friend auditioned and got the job.

The Junior Morning Show was canceled after just three weeks for violating child labor laws (Henson was 17 and of legal working age, but several of his fellow puppeteers were not). However, Jim's journey to the Muppets was just getting started. "Once he got into puppetry on TV, he realized he was good at it," Jones says. "Part of that was because he hadn't been raised on puppetry and didn't know the rules."

Henson bounced between TV productions, where his puppet skills were put to good use. At the same time, he enrolled at the

Opposite, from top: Henson touched up an early Kermit; Jim and Jane met in a puppetry class at the University of Maryland, married in 1959, and had five children. Above: Henson maneuvered Rowlf the Dog in conversation with singer Jimmy Dean in 1963.

University of Maryland in 1954 and signed up for a puppetry course. It was there that he met another student, Jane Nebel, who would become Henson's partner in puppetry, business, and eventually, in marriage.

The first known mention of the word "Muppets" appeared in 1955 in the TV highlights section of the *Washington Post and Times Herald* in a description of a new variety show called *Afternoon*. The listing promised "special features by the Muppets, who are puppeteers." It's unclear if the term originally referred to Jim and Jane, rather than their creations, or if that listing was a mistake.

As for where the word "Muppet" itself comes from, the truth is, nobody knows. "For a long time, I would tell people it was a combination of marionettes and puppets, but basically, it was really just a word that we coined," Henson told journalist Judy Harris in a 1982 interview. "We have done very few things connected with marionettes."

From early on, what defined the Muppets were the many ways Henson and Nebel innovated the art of puppetry for television. Their biggest breakthrough was the realization that the traditional puppet theater featured in live acts was no longer necessary. "We used the set itself like a puppet stage, with the characters moving in free space, framed by the television set," Henson explained at the Broadcasting and Cable Hall of Fame ceremony in 1993. "Everything we did was designed for television."

They also came up with the idea of placing a monitor in front of the puppeteers so they could watch their performance in real time. This provided an advantage human actors didn't have: the ability to observe the puppets in action and adjust on the fly. "You'd perform, but you'd also be the audience," Jane Henson told Jones for his biography. "I think that's a big difference, because the people at home watching are seeing a very intimate, internal thing that's happening with that performer."

The Muppets' success on *Afternoon* eventually led

It was initially unclear who would work which character on Sesame Street, *but the mild-mannered Henson took on Ernie while the more serious Oz piloted Bert. Opposite: Eight feet tall and with a sense of childlike wonder, Big Bird was conceived of as a stand-in for the show's young audience.*

to their own show, called *Sam and Friends,* which aired beginning in May 1955 on the Washington, D.C., network WRC-TV, filling a five-minute gap between the local news and *The Tonight Show.*

Sam and Friends is arguably the earliest incarnation of what would eventually become the Muppets as we know them today. Its star was Sam, a bald human puppet with a round nose, but his friends were much weirder. There was Harry the Hipster (a snake-like thing sporting sunglasses), a purple skull named Yorick, and a pair of Muppets with beak-shaped noses called Hank and Frank. And then there was Kermit.

Kermit wasn't a frog yet, and his skin was milky blue. Henson created him while spending time with his dying grandfather and constructed him out of his mother's old coat, with a Ping-Pong ball cut in half for the eyes. Kermit was always special, and paradoxically, his simple design made him one of the most expressive Muppets. "Kermit is the closest one to me," Henson once told the *Washington Post.* "He's the easiest to talk with. He's the only one who can't be worked by anyone else, only by me. See, Kermit is just a piece of cloth with a mouthpiece in it. The character is literally my right hand."

Sam and Friends had a frantic energy, with each five-minute episode featuring a mix of lip-syncing and slapstick comedy that typically ended in violence. "In the early days of the Muppets, we had two endings," Henson told Stephanie St. Pierre for her book *The Story of Jim Henson: Creator of the Muppets.* "Either one creature ate the other, or both of them blew up." But *Sam and Friends* was a hit, even winning a local Emmy, and whenever the station tried to cancel it, it was inundated with angry fan letters. The show ultimately ran for six years and over 400 episodes. But Henson was already thinking bigger.

The Commercial Era

It didn't take long for Steve Allen, then host of *The Tonight Show,* to find out about the bizarre puppets appearing on TV sets around the D.C. area each night right before him. So in 1956, Allen invited

the Muppets to New York to perform in front of a national audience.

The two-minute performance features Kermit in a blond wig lip-syncing "I've Grown Accustomed to Your Voice" to a second character obscured by a mask. As Kermit continues, the other Muppet eats the mask and is revealed to be Yorick (the purple skull), who then proceeds to devour Kermit's leg and drag him offstage. It was classic early Muppets: simple and weird, with a violent ending. The audience loved it.

In the next few years, the Muppets continued to appear on various late-night and variety shows. At around the same time, Jim and Jane were approached by the Washington, D.C., advertising agency Belmont Ver Standig to produce a series of 10-second ads for its client Wilkins Coffee. The result was a pair of Muppets named Wilkins (who loved Wilkins Coffee) and Wontkins (who didn't). Most of the ads focused on Wilkins attempting to convince Wontkins otherwise—usually through violence.

The ads were a huge shift from the simple, calm TV commercials of the time. They were also an instant success. Henson made almost 180 ads and boosted Wilkins Coffee sales by 25 percent. The company even sold Wilkins and Wontkins puppets (technically the first Muppets merch) during the 1958 Christmas season. The Hensons never saw a cent of those sales.

Muppets, Inc. was established in 1958, and by the 1960s, the team started to grow beyond Jim and Jane. (They married in 1959). In 1961, Henson met a young Frank Oz, then still a high school student, at the Puppeteers of America festival. Oz was there with his parents, both successful puppeteers, and was performing an act with his friend Jerry Juhl, a few years his senior.

Soon afterward, Henson made his first hires in Don Sahlin (who designed and built Muppets) and Juhl (as a performer and eventually head writer). Juhl jumped at the opportunity. "This guy [Jim Henson] was like a sailor who had studied the compass and found that there was a fifth direction in which one could sail," Juhl told biographer Christopher Finch. "When he offered me a berth on that ship, I signed on."

That same year, Henson and Juhl traveled to Germany to perform at the U.S. Food Fair, where they tested out several new concepts, including a German-speaking chef who was controlled by two people (Henson used one hand to operate the head and his second as the character's left hand, while Juhl controlled the right hand). The character was a hit and later became Muppets mainstay the Swedish Chef. Soon afterward, when Purina commissioned the Muppets for a series of dog food commercials, Henson decided to use a similar two-handed puppet design in the creation of another now-iconic Muppet: Rowlf the Dog.

Two pivotal things happened to the Muppets in 1963. First, Frank Oz graduated from high school and moved to New York, where Henson and the rest of the crew had recently set up shop. Oz immediately changed the dynamic, bringing new energy and talent to an already impressive operation. "Frank and Jim were Lennon and McCartney," Jones says.

Second, the Muppets got an offer for a recurring segment on *The Jimmy Dean Show,* a new variety show starring the country music star. This quickly led to a team-up between Dean and Rowlf, who would appear together in regular segments to banter and sing. Behind the scenes, Henson got the opportunity to sit in the writers room and observe how a variety show got made. But the biggest breakthrough came from watching Rowlf interact with Jimmy Dean.

"None of my Muppets had ever worked with humans before," Henson reflected in an interview with *Baltimore Sun* journalist Aldine Bird. "Jimmy Dean… turned Rowlf into a perfectly believable human kind of dog." As the '60s rolled on, the Muppets only became more successful, bouncing between various TV shows and commercials (a Frito-Lay deal led to the creation of a snack-eating creature later known as Cookie Monster). But Jim Henson was also becoming increasingly dissatisfied. "The Muppets were paying the bills," Jones says, "but Jim was always experimenting." These experiments included an Oscar-nominated, abstract short film called *Time Piece* and the experimental documentary *Youth 68: Everything's Changing… or Maybe It Isn't,* broadcast on NBC. Henson also became obsessed with the idea of opening a high-end nightclub where visuals matching the music would be projected on the walls, and he almost purchased a building in New York to make it happen.

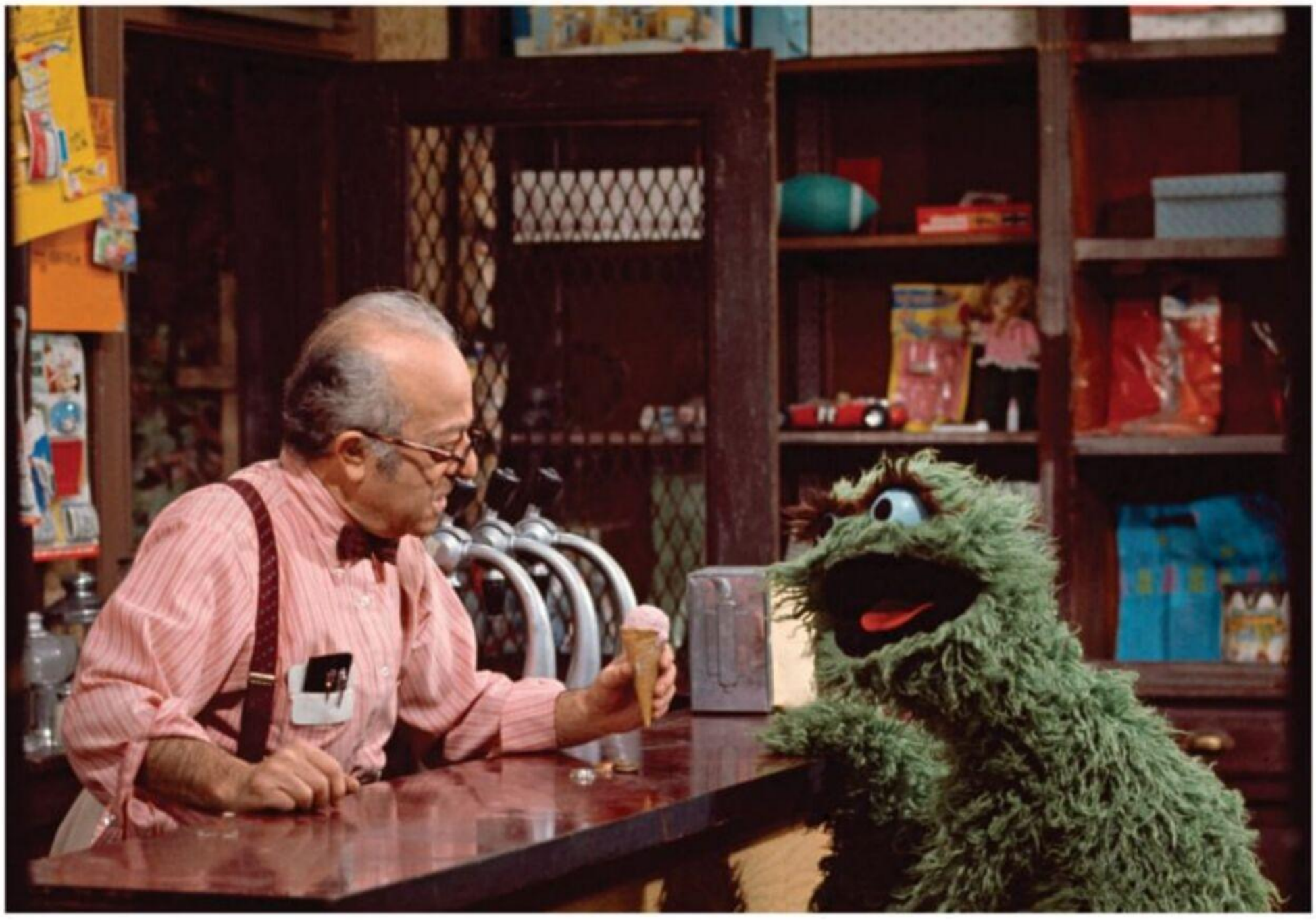
By the late '60s, the Muppets had never been bigger—and Henson had never been more distracted. There's an alternate timeline where he pivoted entirely to avant-garde filmmaking (or perhaps opened a chain of discotheques). Instead, he got an offer he couldn't resist. "Without *Sesame Street,* it would have been a completely different trajectory," Miller says.

Sesame Street

"You can't think of *Sesame Street* without the Muppets," says Jones. And yet, when the Children's Television Workshop was first drawing up ideas for a kids' show that could be both educational and entertaining (a radical idea at the time), Henson wasn't involved. It took a while for CTW to invite the Muppets' creator to join their production, and even then, he resisted, wary of getting pigeonholed even further as a children's entertainer. But ultimately, he gave in. "Jim thought we shouldn't be ashamed of kids watching TV," Jones says. "It should be meaningful. That was a big reason he joined the project."

The first two Muppets created for *Sesame Street* were Ernie and Bert, an odd couple in the mold of Wilkins and Wontkins who would be played by Henson and Oz. "The design was so simple and pure and wonderful," Oz told biographer Christopher Finch. "You had somebody who is all vertical and somebody who is horizontal."

While the original plan was to keep the human characters and Muppets separate to avoid confusing children, CTW soon ran into a problem. When they



Oscar the Grouch (opposite, with Mr. Hooper) signaled that Sesame Street *wasn't just for kids. Above: Oz, Henson, and other puppeteers making the ABC special* The Muppet Show: Sex and Violence, *the original Muppets pilot.*

showed *Sesame Street* to test audiences, kids got bored whenever the action cut away from the puppets. They realized they needed Muppets to interact with the humans, too, which meant creating two more characters: Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch.

Sesame Street debuted in November 1969 and was an overnight hit. That December, Big Bird appeared as a guest on *Ed Sullivan*. But Jim Henson wasn't satisfied. He was still experimenting with other Muppet ideas, including *The Great Santa Claus Switch* (his 1970 TV movie featuring both puppets and humans, which wasn't a huge success but led to the creation of both Gonzo and the Fraggles) and the first performance of his groovy musical sketch "Mahna Mahna" in 1969 (also on *Sullivan*).

By the early '70s, Henson was stuck on another idea: a live Broadway show featuring the Muppets. To test it out, he teamed up in 1971 with Nancy Sinatra for her Las Vegas residency, which featured an oversized "Mahna Mahna" performance and a massive new Muppet called Bossman. When that worked, Henson moved forward with his plan, at one point even renting out a theater in New York.

It was around this time that Dave Goelz, a puppet maker from Silicon Valley who would go on to perform as Gonzo the Great, Dr. Bunsen Honeydew, and countless other Muppets, joined the company after being promised that if the Broadway show (or something else) got picked up, he would get to perform. "Jim more than kept that promise," Goelz says.

However, it wasn't on Broadway. "We found other things to do," Goelz explains. Instead, Henson had returned to another idea that he'd been toying with for years: a 30-minute prime time TV show starring the Muppets.

Pitching *The Muppet Show*

"The time is right for a variety show hosted by dogs, frogs, and monsters," Henson proclaimed in his original pitch. A young ABC executive named Michael Eisner (who would eventually become the CEO of Disney) quickly saw the appeal and

"We know each other so well that we can kind of bounce off each other when we're working," Henson said of the original team. "This working relationship…has a kind of marvelous chemistry to it."

approved a pilot in 1973. The Muppets got to work.

Henson's first idea was *The Muppets Valentine Show,* a riff on holiday-themed TV specials. With Mia Farrow as celebrity guest, the show starred a new Muppet called Wally, with Kermit relegated to a supporting role (Henson wanted to focus on running the show rather than performing as its lead character). Goelz created several new Muppets, including an old man named Brewster. More important, he finally got his chance to perform. "Jim and Frank came in after work and worked with me in front of the mirror on puppetry," Goelz recalls. During a press tour, Henson continued to push back against the assumption that puppets were for kids."We made this special to appeal to all ages, because a lot of people just think of us as a company that does shows for children," he told *The Hollywood Reporter.*

The Muppets Valentine Show aired in January 1974. The response was positive, but ABC wasn't sold. Instead of picking up the show, they eventually offered Henson a development deal for a few programs and another shot at a pilot.

In response, he leaned even harder into his conviction that there was an adult audience for puppets. The

result was *The Muppet Show: Sex and Violence*. "It would be a half-hour show, with no guest star [and] a lot more zany comedy," Henson wrote. New characters developed for *Sex and Violence* included a grinning keyboard player named Dr. Teeth, the Swedish Chef (originally called the Swedish Meatball), the ever-serious Sam the Eagle, iconic hecklers Statler and Waldorf (although they wouldn't get their balcony seats just yet), and the Electric Mayhem Band.

An early version of Miss Piggy, who had already been through several permutations, also appeared. Bonnie Erickson, who designed the puppet, says there was a last-minute need for a "young diva" character, and Miss Piggy was available. "I had to throw on whatever fabric we had," Erickson recalls. "It was lavender satin. I didn't have time to redo her arms, which had hooves, so I made gloves, which stuck around for quite a while. To hide the seam between her head and body, I added a bunch of pearls."

Erickson also created Statler and Waldorf. The iconic Muppet hecklers were inspired by the old men she used to observe hanging out at the Yale Club at Grand Central Station. "I sketched two old guys in the club and showed it to Jim," Erickson recalls. "He said, 'We don't really have anything for that,' but later he came back and said, 'It's time to do those guys.'"

Once again, Kermit took a backseat in *The Muppet Show: Sex and Violence*. The plot centered on Nigel, Sam the Eagle, and Floyd Pepper (Electric Mayhem's hippie bassist) organizing a pageant inspired by the seven deadly sins. Reviews were mixed, and ABC decided not to move forward. "The network couldn't see beyond the puppets," Miller says. "They didn't believe anyone over a child's age would watch. They weren't willing to put them on prime time."

After ABC passed, CBS briefly entertained the idea, but when that fell through, too, it seemed that Henson's grand vision for the Muppets had failed yet again. And then a lifeline came flying in from an unexpected place.

The Muppet Show

Lord Lew Grade had been keeping an eye on Jim Henson ever since they had crossed paths in London a few years earlier during the production of a TV special starring the Muppets and Julie Andrews. A vaudeville dancer turned television mogul, Grade saw promise in Henson's idea. He reached out in 1975, offering to produce the series in England and syndicate it around the world. By January 1976, Henson was in London filming the first two episodes of *The Muppet Show*.

A new show once again meant new characters. This time, that included Scooter and Fozzie Bear. They also brought back Gonzo the Great from *The Great Santa Claus Switch*, who was pitched to Goelz as a performance artist making "terrible art."

Goelz recalls coming up with Gonzo's voice the morning before a rehearsal: "I was shaving, and I was thinking, I really need to think of a voice for this guy. What does he sound like? And as I was shaving, I thought, well, he has a long nose, so he's probably nasal. So make him kind of like that, but he's really scruffy looking, so I'll add a little gravel to it."

When early cuts of the first two episodes got mixed internal feedback, Henson finally gave in and installed Kermit as the star of the show, partially to win over *Sesame Street* fans (Ernie and Bert also appeared in one early segment). "There's a bit of me in Kermit," Henson told London's *TV Times*. "Kermit's the organizer, always desperately trying to keep things going while surrounded by all these crazy nuts."

Finally, all those characters developed over the years had a place to interact and evolve. For the first time, the Muppets had a home all their own. Some background characters (like Miss Piggy) got their chance in the limelight. Others took longer to develop. Fozzie Bear proved particularly challenging.

Frank Oz struggled to make the character, an anxious stand-up comedian, work within the context of *The Muppet Show*. It was only once they paired him with Kermit as the straight man to Fozzie's clumsy comic that it all clicked into place.

"We were so fortunate we didn't get the original ABC series," Goelz observes. "Had we gotten a network special, we would have been canceled in a few episodes, because it took us a while to find our audience—to find the show the characters. We were lucky that we were syndicated. At the time, we thought, oh, we're second-class citizens, but it turned out we owe our lives to that, because we had a full 24 episodes a season to just work."

The Muppet Show premiered in September 1976. Each TV station could choose which episode to debut from out of the first batch, but most picked the one starring Rita Moreno, which included her iconic performance of "Fever" with an overzealous Animal on drums. The show became a global phenomenon, proving once and for all that Jim Henson was right: A prime time program starring the Muppets and made for adults could succeed.

Of course, that was just the beginning. *The Muppet Show* would run for five years—and after that, movies and so much more. Just over two decades after the word "Muppets" first appeared in print, announcing a pair of young puppeteers on a local network variety show, the Muppets were somehow still just getting started on a journey that would take them to the forefront of popular culture and beyond.

In hindsight, it's easy to see the Muppets as inevitable. These characters have existed for so long now that they seem as real as our favorite human actors, but the story of their creation reveals just how much had to go right (and wrong) to bring these weird, beautiful, groundbreaking puppets to life. □

Opposite, from top: Miss Piggy and Mark Hamill, Waldorf and Statler, Dick Van Dyke with Piggy and Kermit, the Swedish Chef.

Kermit the Frog and his creator, Jim Henson, on the set of 1979's The Muppet Movie.

The Muppets Go Hollywood

A decade into their hit TV show, the Muppets made a move for the big screen.

BY JOHN SKOW

From TIME, December 25, 1978

STOP GIGGLING AND PAY ATTENTION, because we are going to discuss what may be the only adult show on television. Children may stay in the room if they do not squeal excessively. Now, then: What is small and green and surrounded by confusion, and is applauded each week by more people than there are in the entire U.S.?

No, not the wobbling dollar, but a more cheerful and indeed more bankable asset: Kermit the Frog. He is the gallant and slightly desperate master of ceremonies of a weekly eruption called *The Muppet Show,* which, in its third season on the air, has become what is almost certainly the most popular television entertainment now being produced on earth. *The Muppet Show* is seen by at least 235 million people in 106 countries. Those who have not met Kermit will ask, in thank-you-not-today tones, "A frog?" And they will ask, "Adult?" The answer to the first question is a confident yes, and the answer to the second is a ringing yes, but…

A phenomenon has been observed: Children trap their parents in front of the terrible tube and force them to watch the Muppets. The parents become

habituated, and thenceforth on Muppet night somewhat sheepishly remind the children to close their calculus textbooks and turn on the set. In the last stage of addiction, the parents are sheepless and do not require the presence of child stooges.

For those who have been out of touch with this aspect of reality, what, exactly, is a Muppet? The word was coined from "marionette" and "puppet," says Jim Henson, 42, the skinny, bearded Zeus from whose brow the creatures began to spring 20-odd years ago, when he was a teenager hooked on television. He is the rarest of creatures in the imitative and adaptive world of entertainment—an originator. His brilliant central perception was that puppets could throw away the Punch and Judy box that had confined them for centuries and let the television set be their stage. The camera demanded the use of close-ups, and abruptly the old single-expression puppet was obsolete. The Muppets were new, and they were pure television creatures. Today they are the stars of *Sesame Street* as well as of Henson's global hit *The Muppet Show.*

Like other geniuses, Henson is a sly fellow whose sound artistic instinct is to resist critical analysis. If you peel art away, layer after layer, what you have at the end is all peelings and no onion. For years, Henson, who plays Kermit, insisted that the character was not a frog but "a froglike creature." Peel that, you peelers. Now he backtracks and says that "muppet" was simply a word that sounded good to him. The sound combination of puppet and marionette is merely an explanation that happens to sound logical.

Logic-peeling aside, a Muppet is (most of the time, but not always) a largish arm puppet whose body contains the arm and whose head surrounds the hand of its operator. When the operator's thumb and fingers come together, the Muppet's mouth closes; when thumb and fingers separate, the mouth opens. If the Muppet's face is pliable, as Kermit's is, he is not much more than a green felt sock that fits over a human hand, with a wide pinksplit for the mouth and what look like glued-on halves of Ping-Pong balls for eyes. The clenchings and wrigglings of the operator's fist can change the expression with considerable subtlety. Not simply smiles but wistful smiles are possible. If the face is relatively stiff, like that of Kermit's formidable friend Miss Piggy (whose head is carved from a block of plastic insulating foam), then, although a certain degree of meaningful nose crinkling is possible, expressiveness is largely an illusion created by body movement and voice. In either case, the puppeteer can synchronize the figure's lip movements to its speech, a technique Henson originated early in his career. Muppet jaws do not move with each syllable—that would make bigmouthed figures look too agitated—and it takes long practice to learn the knack of mouthing the important syllables of a sentence.

An observation made with some regularity is that Kermit the Frog is the Mickey Mouse of the 1970s. Maybe so; the Muppets have just finished making an $8 million Hollywood film, called *The Muppet Movie,* that chronicles their journey from the boondocks to showbusiness glory. Another film is under discussion; an astonishing variety of Muppet toys and other artifacts, including arm puppets, fill the stores; an amusement park of the Dis-

The Muppet Movie *centers on how the group of felt-made friends came together and got started in show business.*

neyland sort has been talked of; Muppets have been in TV commercials and made guest appearances on such varied offerings as the old *Ed Sullivan Show* and the current *Saturday Night Live*. This week, an hour-long TV special, *Emmet Otter's Jug-Band Christmas,* is on in the U.S. And, of course, the Muppets Bert and Ernie, Oscar the Grouch (who lives in a garbage can), and the renowned Big Bird, who is eight feet tall and has not just an arm but an entire person inside him, have presided over *Sesame Street* since that wonderfully imaginative children's show began 10 years ago.

The Muppet Show opens, always, with a knock on a dressing-room door. Scooter, the company's errand boy, sticks his head inside to announce curtain time. He is a human boy caricatured, and thus a representative of one of the show's three main species. Human Muppets are featured players: Floyd, the supremely groovy guitarist; Janice, his girlfriend; Zoot, the blue-faced sax player who has seen it all; Animal, the out-of-control drummer who must be chained to the wall; Crazy Harry, the special-effects man who is fond of explosions; the incomprehensible and meatball-brained Swedish Chef; and such peripheral loonies as Lew Zealand, manager of a boomerang fish act.

The stars are the animals: Kermit, the pure and reasonable frog; the ineffable Miss Piggy, every circumferential inch a lady; Rowlf the Dog, a philosophical pianist; Fozzie Bear, the can't-stand-up comic; and the Great Gonzo, the magnificently inferior creature whose inventors insist, despite damning evidence, that he is not a turkey. Monsters are the remaining important category of beings—such enormities as Sweetums, who is about nine feet tall and covered with a three-day growth of brownish shag, and Thog, who is a good deal bigger and still growing, lend chaos to the goings-on but don't say much. Other apparitions, such as the seven-foot carrot with which Gilda Radner sang a Gilbert and Sullivan duet, fit messily into miscellaneous.

Scooter's curtain-time alert is for the flesh-and-blood human being who is the weekly guest star: Raquel Welch, for instance, looking scholarly in spectacles as she practices Shakespeare. Scooter guesses that she has decided to change her image, and he says that this is fine; she doesn't need to wear any of those scanty, revealing costumes on *The Muppet Show.*

"Well, thanks, Scooter…"

"…unless you want to."

Immediately, half a dozen heavy-duty monsters thrust themselves through the door to beg in plaintive unison, "Oh, please want to!" The joke works nicely because these are Muppets, and their voyeurism is acceptable. It is the kind of gag that evokes queasiness when it is given to middle-aged bandleaders on variety shows.

After Floyd, Zoot, Rowlf, Animal and other bandsmen have laid down the show's theme song ("It's time to put on makeup/ It's time to dress up right") for the big everybody-on-stage opening, Kermit gives viewers the high-blood-pressure hello, and Gonzo tries to blow a fanfare on his trumpet. It never works. Butterflies come out of the trumpet. Water comes out, or the thing explodes. Each week Gonzo gives it a good try; each week a new disaster. Gonzo looks dazed but not surprised, a tiny Chaplin.

Some sort of dizzy production number generally follows. One week, Eskimo folk songs were promised, and sure enough, there were Miss Piggy and the show's other pigs perched on an ice floe, dressed in mukluks and parkas, surrounded by igloos, walruses, and snow. In the meantime, two old geezers named Statler and Waldorf are making scornful remarks from their box seats, and terrible things are happening backstage. Kermit works frogfully, but events conspire against him. It is payday, and in the cashbox Kermit finds only "three moths and a washer, more than we usually have."

There is a wondrous Muppet workshop at HA! headquarters in Manhattan, where clever trolls build anything from a talking avocado to a dancing camel, or, more routinely, replacement figures for Fozzie Bear and Kermit (a crisis, still not entirely resolved, developed recently when the manufacturer of the green cloth of which Kermit is made went out of business). But the most critical element of what the viewer sees is not cloth or polyurethane. It is character: Each of the most successful Muppets has grown, slowly and organically, from exaggerated fragments of its operator's character. Kermit is not Jim Henson, but he is a fascinating piece of Henson. He is the smartest of the Muppets, and he runs things as firmly as it is possible to run an explosion in a mattress factory. Like Henson, he is the absolute boss in all matters artistic and financial. Kermit is, in addition, a lovable, absolutely decent fellow. Henson's employees agree, with complete unanimity, that Henson is that sort of boss. He had no plan to make *The Muppet Show* emcee a self-portrait, but when he used another puppet, Nigel the Bandleader, in the role in an early version of the show, the character did not jell, and Kermit, who had been in and out of Henson's skits for 20 years or so, got the job.

Mel Brooks, an impassioned Muppet fan, says that "the message they telegraph is 'The meek shall inherit the earth.'" Mostly this is true. Kermit is meek; he is thankful for each day during which the sky does not fall. Gonzo is meek, and Rowlf tickles the ivories with a dogged smile. Fozzie Bear is a Teddy. Except for Animal, who wrestles alligators when he is let off his chain, the only alarming character in Muppet society is Miss Piggy, she of the iron fists in lavender gloves. "She wants everyone to treat her like a lady, and if they don't, she'll cut them in half," says Muppeteer Frank Oz, 34. He should know—it is his right arm that wriggles Miss Piggy through her black-belt coquetries.

When *The Muppet Show* began, Miss Piggy was a nobody, a mere member of the porker chorus. In less than three years, by a dazzling combination of talent, beauty and physical violence when batting her eyelashes doesn't bring surrender, she has

Henson said The Muppet Movie *was the "flip side" of* The Muppet Show. *The show invited guests into the Muppets' world; in the film, the Muppets were unleashed on the real world (and Bob Hope guest-starred).*

become a star. Her finest moments now may be when she plays the ingenue role in the show's arrestingly torpid "Pigs in Space" skit, a send-up that is funny because it assumes, correctly, that the viewer is bored by astronauts. Aboard the spaceship *Swine-trek,* she is every bit as lard-witted as Captain Link Hogthrob and the sinister Dr. Strangepork, and she is greedy for her rightful attention.

She is also greedy for Kermit, and once, under the pretext of doing a wedding skit, she managed to maneuver him in front of a fully loaded preacher (he escaped the pit of matrimony by the desperate stratagem of summoning Lew Zealand, who had been hanging around backstage waiting for his lucky break, to bring on those tacky and awful boomerang fish). Miss Piggy has a wandering eye, however, and if the week's guest star happens to be a good-looking man, she latches onto him. After dancing the stirring pas de deux from *Swine Lake* with Rudolf Nureyev, she stalked the poor fellow into a steam bath and drove him forth with his towel askew.

"She's lusty," says Oz. He feels that at heart she is true to Kermit. "She loves that little frog. She wants her frog and her career. She's torn, like everyone else." Oz is conceded to be, after Henson, the most gifted of the Muppet performers. He taught Miss Piggy all she knows, and he plays Fozzie Bear, Animal, Sam the Eagle, and, on *Sesame Street,* Bert and Cookie Monster. Holding his naked right hand in the air, Oz demonstrates the basics of Muppet acting. "You can do proud"—his hand sways and struts upward. "Sad"—the hand, with its closed fingers forward, as a Muppet's mouth might be, droops at the wrist, and the fingers float downward. "Confusion"—the hand pauses, looks one way, looks another, pauses, seems to be glancing over its shoulder.

One morning, on the set of *The Muppet Movie,* Oz stood among the camera cables, waiting to do a shot with Henson/Kermit. He considered Miss Piggy's psyche: "She's had her consciousness raised, but she still likes diamonds. She's a very '50s lady, and that's part of the problem." As he talked, his hand slipped into its working position inside Miss Piggy. She twisted this way and that, looking for Kermit, eager to get on with the movie.

After a take, as director Jim Frawley (*Kid Blue*) yelled, "Cut!", Miss Piggy patted Kermit on his little green behind. Kermit swatted at her hand and jumped aside. Miss Piggy then complained teasingly about "the man who is always following me around,"

Kermit opened The Muppet Movie *crooning "The Rainbow Connection"; Miss Piggy serenaded her beloved with "Never Before, Never Again."*

referring to Oz, and coyly peeked under the green flap at the bottom of Kermit's costume, exposing Jim Henson's arm. "Oh, you've got one too!" she said. It was the kind of off-camera byplay that goes on more or less constantly.

Making a full-length Muppet movie was a gamble. Could the loopy, slapdash spontaneity of the television program be sustained through a long film narration? Could Frawley frame his shots so that it would not be painfully obvious that most of the characters lacked workable feet? How would Muppets look outdoors? To settle that point, Frawley last spring took a Super 8 to England, where the Muppets' TV show is taped, and did a test with Henson and the others in a meadow. As he was shooting, a cow wandered over to have a look at Fozzie. The results were amazingly good; the brown cow and the puppet covered with burnt-orange fake fur looked as natural together as Newman and Redford.

The shooting for the film was slow and difficult. The first scene called for the camera to swoop down on a Georgia swamp, where Kermit is discovered sitting on a log in the middle of a pond, playing a banjo. The decision had been made to try for the realism of actual photography rather than fake scenes with process shots. So a watertight tank was built, and into the tank went a small television camera and all six feet three inches of Jim Henson. The tank was lowered to the concrete bottom of the movie set's swamp, the log was fitted on top of it, and Kermit was perched on the log. Air was fed to Henson through a hose, and electric cables brought him Frawley's instructions and the TV picture. Divers stood by to rescue Henson in case the tank leaked. Through a rubber sleeve at the top of the tank, Henson manipulated Kermit's head and, using a stiff and nearly invisible black wire, made Kermit's left hand strum the banjo strings. Another Muppeteer on shore worked a radio control that allowed Kermit's right hand to do the chord changes. Now and then, between takes, someone would row over and pass a cup of iced tea down to Henson through the rubber sleeve.

The swamp scene was by no means the most complicated. The script calls for a Hollywood talent scout (played by a human actor, Dom DeLuise) who has strayed into the swamp to paddle by, discover Kermit, and show him a copy of *Variety* that contains, by chance, an ad urging "all frogs who want to become rich and famous" to come to Hollywood. But down the road lurks Doc Hopper (Charles Durning), who wants this particular talented frog to shill for his fast-food chain, which specializes in French fried frog legs. Kermit encounters all of his *Muppet Show* pals and such assorted humans as Elliott Gould, Carol Kane, and Telly Savalas on his journey to Los Angeles. At one point, the Muppets are riding in an old Studebaker, with Fozzie at the wheel, several others in the front seat, and another bunch in the rear. Jammed under the dashboard and behind the backseat, with all of their cables and TV monitors, lie half a dozen puppeteers. Along with Henson and Oz are Jerry Nelson, who does Floyd and Dr. Strangepork and can project nine different voices;

Richard Hunt, a young, curly-headed, outgoing fellow who does Scooter and Sweetums; Dave Goelz (Zoot, Gonzo), a former industrial designer who got started when he saw Ernie on *Sesame Street* and made his own Ernie doll; and, squeezed in somewhere, a newcomer named Steve Whitmire. The Muppet people work under conditions that would not be acceptable to tunnel rats.

The 100 days of shooting ended when all the scenery fell down, as planned, in a movie-within-the-movie that Kermit and his friends were trying to make. Their Styrofoam rainbow lay in pieces, but, through a jagged hole in the soundstage roof, a real rainbow was seen to shimmer. Happy ending. Quick, sweep the stage and pack the Muppets in their boxes, because taping for the TV show's new season begins in London in five days.

Muppets live in suitcases, and Muppet people live out of suitcases. Jim Henson gave up the key to his rented Mulholland Drive hacienda and flew to New York. There he rallied the support troops at HA! headquarters and conferred with his increasingly large staff of business people.

Henson is clearly a gifted businessman, and on the point of becoming a very wealthy one, but he is secretive when asked to talk figures. *The Muppet Show,* considered separately, is listed on the books as making no profit, in part because Henson keeps putting money back into the program. Help is on the way. "The long-range profit for this show is down the road, when it's syndicated and sold to the stations," Henson says. "It's a couple years away." Producer Lew Grade adds with satisfaction that the take from this "strip syndication"—the sale of a show for the same time slot several days a week—will be split equally between HA! and his ACC group and will mean "millions of dollars." Until then, HA! is supported handsomely by fat merchandising contracts with such outfits as Fisher-Price and Hallmark. Muppet faces appear on coffee mugs, T-shirts, yo-yos, playing cards, pillowcases, and anything else that will take an imprint. Henson is good at big money deals and smart enough not to boast about them. "It's important to me that the audience doesn't think of us in terms of figures," he says. "I don't want people looking at the Muppets and thinking, 'How much are they worth?'"

Henson has little time for brooding, even about money. After a few days of business talks in New York, he packed his winter clothes and flew to London, where, according to his contract with Grade, the TV series must be taped. Within hours of his arrival, shooting had begun. Several of the pig Muppets had started an off-camera fight but had been quelled. Guest star Harry Belafonte had sung "The Banana Boat Song" with spirit, even though Captain Link Hogthrob pigged one of the bananas.

In New York, costumer Calista Hendrickson worked on a purple chiffon dress for Miss Piggy to wear on one of the fall shows in which she dances cheek-to-cheek with Danny Kaye. Hendrickson began to talk about what the Muppets mean to people, and that reminded her of the first time the crew met [ventriloquist] Edgar Bergen, a guest star on one of the early shows. "When he walked into our studio in London, they all gathered around him like children. And then the box was brought in, Charlie's box, and they all sank to the floor and sat in a circle around it. And then Bergen opened the box and Charlie came out and said hello and introduced himself around. He met Fozzie, and the two of them went on and on, all ad-libbed. No one moved an inch." Bergen did a cameo in *The Muppet Movie,* and a few weeks later, he died. "One of the stagehands on the movie couldn't understand why everybody was so affected by Bergen's death. 'You'd think Charlie McCarthy had died,' he said. One of the puppeteers whirled around and said, 'But he did! Don't you see? And so did Mortimer Snerd! And if Henson goes, Kermit goes!'"

MAKING A FULL-LENGTH MUPPET MOVIE WAS A GAMBLE. COULD THE LOOPY, SLAPDASH SPONTANEITY OF THE TELEVISION PROGRAM BE SUSTAINED THROUGH A LONG FILM NARRATION?

Kermit is alive and well, and Charlie and Mortimer were, after all, only puppets. If the world were a wholly rational place, their claims on it would be small. But they do make claims, and strong ones. Kermit, rueful and dithered, frees a part of our own natures so absurd and defenseless that we would never let a human actor hold it in his hands. What these puppets mean to the millions of people who have watched them is almost embarrassing to express, because the feeling they evoke is nothing less than love. □

A Creative Visionary

While making the documentary *Jim Henson: Idea Man,* director Ron Howard found commonality with his subject.

BY MAUREEN LEE LENKER

From *Entertainment Weekly,* May 30, 2024

IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN... OR ONE of the most beloved directors in Hollywood.

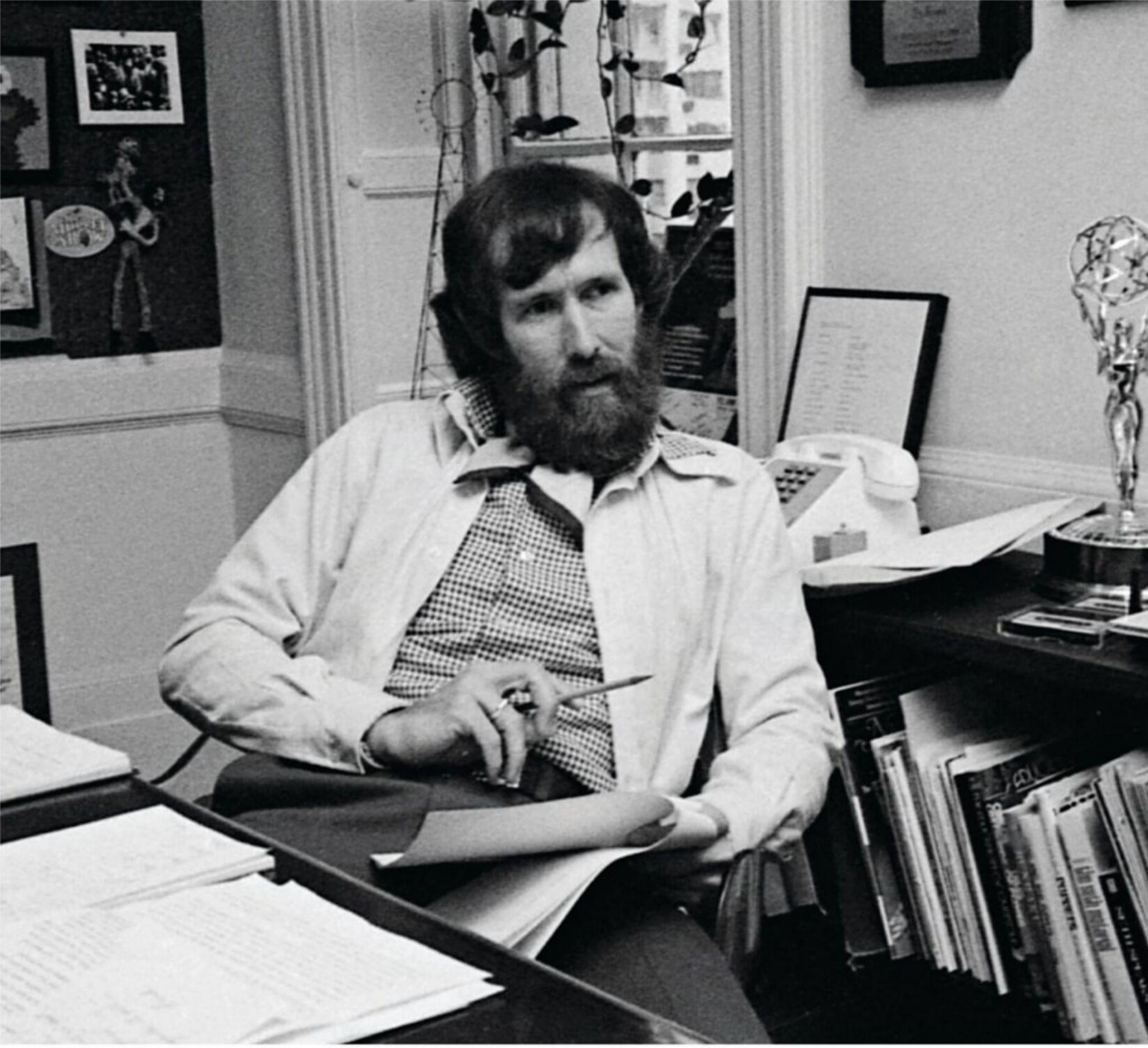
Ron Howard, whose latest directorial effort is the documentary *Jim Henson: Idea Man,* has now spent a ton of time immersed in the world of the Jim Henson Company and the Muppets—but he hasn't changed his mind about his favorite Muppet.

"It's Kermit, which is kind of an easy answer," he tells *Entertainment Weekly.* "Jim related to Kermit for a set of reasons that makes me relate to Kermit—he's a pretty regular guy just trying to get along, and yet he's surrounded by a bunch of high-octane, eccentric folks. He's trying to be the reasonable one in a world that could sometimes seem kind of mad. Jim got that, and I do, too."

"The interesting thing is that Jim was an introvert, but he became an extrovert when he had a puppet to work through," Howard continues. "He became playful and more buoyant, and he could say more outrageous things. For me, being on the set and directing is when I become an extrovert. It's when I open up and feel freer to express myself.

"This is the origin story of all of these characters," Howard says of *Idea Man.* "Kermit started as his mother's coat, the fabric from some old coat she was throwing away. They didn't even know he was a frog for a long time. They didn't know what he was. He just fit Jim's hand, and Jim could create funny reactions, and the character could be an alter ego for Jim. And then, slowly but surely, they decided he was Kermit the Frog."

Howard came to know Jim Henson and his story intimately while putting together *Idea Man,* which chronicles Henson's life from his upbringing to his creation of the Muppets through to his death at 53.



Henson won three Emmy Awards, for his involvement in The Muppet Show *(1978),* The Storyteller *(1987–1988), and* The Jim Henson Hour *(1989).*

Ahead of the film's May 31 debut on Disney+, we spoke to Howard to get the details on why he chose Henson as his latest documentary subject, what surprised him most about the creator of the Muppets, and whether he would ever want to direct a Muppet movie himself.

You've made docs about the Beatles, Pavarotti, and José Andrés. What led to Jim Henson being your next subject?

RON HOWARD: The family was weighing whether or not they wanted to make their archives available and sanction a documentary. Even though they're filmmakers and TV producers themselves, they didn't want to do it, and so they were looking for a filmmaker. I went into it with a lot of respect for Jim Henson and the projects that I knew the best, but I didn't know much more. I had no idea about the dimension of his journey and his wife Jane's creative path, and how his early experimental work so anticipated these iconic characters and shows.

There's a great creative origin story there that I didn't know would be so entertaining, fascinating, and ultimately inspiring, because they lived their lives totally around this quest for creative fulfillment. And we're the beneficiaries of that. So I

thought, "Well, this is an interesting celebrity profile to think about." Instead, it was this journey that I could so relate to. It's different than mine in many ways, but I so recognized this excitement for creativity and desire to be as productive as you could be and loving to collaborate with people.

You were on *Sesame Street* back in the 1970s, while you were on *Happy Days*. Did you get to meet Jim at that time?

Not at that time. We didn't get to interact with any of the *Sesame Street* characters. We were, Henry Winkler and I, in character, and we did a quick learning piece. It was filmed on our set on the Paramount lot. I remember both of us being a little disappointed that we didn't get to hang out with the puppets.

What was your relationship with Jim Henson and the Muppets throughout your life? Did you get to meet him at some point?

I met him very, very briefly at a really chaotic moment where we were both involved in this live prime time variety show ABC was undertaking. We were both going to be guests, not together, but we crossed paths. First I thought there was a band wheeling a lot of gear in; [they had] long hair and stuff. And then I realized, no, it was Jim Henson. We briefly met, and that was it. Mostly [my relationship to him] was just as a fan. I appreciated the risks he was taking, the creative experiments that he was undertaking on a high-profile level, creating things like *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth*. I always had a lot of respect for him.

When I got started working on the film, though, I realized that I didn't know that so many of those fantastic short films on *Sesame Street,* those little learning films about counting and letters and so forth, that Jim directed all of those, and he created all of that. He didn't just contribute the Muppets to *Sesame Street*. It was this entire aesthetic and approach to making learning fun. That meant a lot to me as a father, sharing that with my four kids as they grew up. My admiration for Jim just kept deepening. George Lucas, whom I've known well over the years, always characterized Jim as a bona fide creative genius. And I second that, having worked on the film and learned what I've learned.

But I also want to add that Jane Henson, his wife, was also extremely talented, very creative, and had a great eye for talent, including Jim, whom she recognized early on as somebody who had a lot to offer. None of this would've happened without her.

In terms of Jane Henson, you really do foreground her in *Idea Man*. When I spoke to you about *The Boys,* you and your brother talked about how you were always with your dad on set, but you didn't fully appreciate how crucial your mother was in holding everything together until you were older. Was that something you saw paralleled and part of why you wanted to make Jane so central in the storytelling?

You're right about the discovery that I made as a son, but this is quite different. Because it was interesting that she had been so central to the development of the Muppets, the Muppet characters, and the Muppets as a business. I didn't know any of that about her, and I felt it was important. It was interesting to hear her children talk about her and their dad with real affection and love and appreciation but also clarity as to the quirkiness, their foibles, and the particular qualities that made their marriage work and ultimately led to it dissolving. But what was left was this great family and this remarkable creative legacy.

Henson and Oz (above) had collobarated together since the early 1960s.
Opposite: A design sketch for The Muppet Movie.

Your company, Imagine, has worked with Frank Oz before. Was that relationship crucial to all of this coming together?

No. We would've done the film even if Frank didn't want to be an interview, but I was so thrilled when he did. It was our first major interview, and he offered so much insight and perspective that it really helped us begin to shape the story. Stylistically, on that first day interviewing Frank, I had the idea of trying to make his entrance in stop motion, which is one of the Jim Henson aesthetic styles that he used so much in those short films and in his experimental films. Frank knew exactly what I was talking about. In one take, he did his kooky entrance where he pops around, and the chair spins around and he sits down. It established for all of us on the creative team that Jim's sensibility was going to be a lot of fun to work with, and we wanted it to be a part of the fabric of the film.

How did that shape the design of the space in which you conducted these interviews, and the way you shot them?

Jim was so experimental, and that's the stuff that we don't really know about. He had this TV show that they allowed him to make very inexpensively in the mid-'60s called *The Cube*. It was a little humorous, *Twilight Zone*–ish, about a guy who was stuck in this room and didn't really know why he was there. It was this great little set, and one of our producers said, "Hey, maybe that should be our interview space." Our cinematographer jumped on that idea. On a practical level, it meant we could take that set to any of our interview subjects and it would feel like they were sharing Jim's space. It was his world when you entered the Cube. But it was also a great opportunity to use each of those cubes like they were a TV screen and keep flooding our screen with images from all those characters, Jim's life, Jane's life, and the kids. It really energized everything, and we kept going deeper and deeper into the aesthetic of Jim's experimental films.

It's about his creative life and his family life and the legacy of his children. Do you think there's something unique to Hollywood families, having come from one yourself?

Look, it's a small business. There aren't that many people who are engaged in it. And for a percentage of

From left: Henson on the sets of The Dark Crystal *(1982) and* Fraggle Rock *(1983).*

those people, it's very high-profile. Their family experienced that. It's unusual to have two parents who are so creatively engaged. There's something unique and bohemian about that. And yet the practical matters of life still factor in, and vestiges of traditional thinking could come in and have an impact on the family. All of this is interesting in terms of making this not only a celebration of his work or his creative journey but a character study of an iconic individual.

Was there anything Jim Henson's kids said that really surprised you?

I would say the fact that he was a paradox in that he wanted to be a traditional parent, and he wanted a traditional marriage, even though—without drugs and the psychedelic side of the rebellion of the '60s—he was a part of the counterculture.

He was about freedom of expression and experimentation and all of that. But when it came to his family, he was traditional. That paradox did surprise me.

The film definitely shows his creative genius. But if you had to pick one thing as sort of his greatest gift, what would you say it was?

His ability to be satirical but not cynical. He was able to, with great affection, say, "Look how silly we can all be. Look how crazy the world can be," and yet not turn that into something bleak, but to recognize joy amid the chaos.

Was there one clip in the archival footage or a story about Jim that really unlocked who he was for you?
His experimental film, *Time Piece*. His kids said, "If you really want to know our dad, look at *Time Piece*." It doesn't have a puppet in it, but it does have this sense of kinetic energy, creativity, wit, and irony. It's funny, but it's also desperate. And the clock is a central character. You realize that, somehow, he was running against time, always. For whatever reason, he was in a race. Did he know he was only going to live for 53 years? Of course not. But did he know time was precious and life was fragile? Yeah, he did.

He lived that way. But it was also the paradox of all of his curiosity, his appetite for life, the whimsy about the way that he expressed himself, and then these moments of desperation. You realize that this was a complicated guy on a very interesting journey.

You've told Jim's story, but would you have any interest in directing a Muppet project, be it with Disney or the Jim Henson Company?
I probably wouldn't, because I think there's already been so much great work done that I don't know that I could really add anything fresh or exciting to it. But I know they'll keep working with the Muppet characters, because they're iconic, and through them, they can say a lot about the world in ways that can be very entertaining but carry a message. □

A scene from the TV special The Muppets Celebrate Jim Henson, *which aired on November 21, 1990.*

It's Not Easy Feeling Blue: Henson's Goodbye

A LIFE magazine reporter visited Muppets headquarters weeks after Henson's 1990 passing.

BY STEPHEN HARRIGAN

From LIFE, July 1990

AS A CELEBRITY, JIM HENSON seemed vague and uncertain. He was just barely in sight, hovering on the fringes of public recognition. When he appeared as himself on television, he came across merely as a nice, boring man. His voice was high and reedy, his manner intense but somehow languid. All in all, he looked at first glance like the sort of aging hippie you might find manning a booth at a crafts fair, passively trying to interest you in his line of Hobbit candles or handcrafted kaleidoscopes. So when he died, the effect was odd. Like millions of others, I suppose, I received the news at first with mild puzzlement ("Jim Henson? The Muppet guy?") and then went back to my day, not anticipating the sense of loss that slowly began to overtake me as the thought sank in. It was not grief—just an unnerving pang. I kept remembering myself as an anxious new parent, sitting there in the sleepy afternoon quiet, the weight of a child in my lap, watching the glum, quizzical faces of the Muppets on *Sesame Street*. I thought of Bert and Ernie tucked into their monogrammed twin beds, Kermit the Frog sitting on a swamp log moodily playing the banjo, my 2-year-old daughter running up to a garbage can in the park shouting, "Oscar! Oscar!" The Muppets were Jim Henson's invention, and it was his spirit, as well as his hands and voice, that animated them. Until he died unexpectedly at age 53 (of toxic shock syndrome following a serious bacterial infection), no one had apparently given much thought to the idea that the Muppets might, in any sense, be mortal. Henson's death made this curious notion unavoidable. After all, he did not just perform Kermit; he was Kermit. He was Ernie as well. He was Rowlf the Dog. He was the Swedish Chef, the jowly curmudgeon known as Waldorf, the porcine space commander Link Hogthrob.

Two weeks after his death, in the headquarters of Jim Henson Productions in Manhattan, there was an air of exponential loss. Henson was dead, and his many characters were held in some kind of eerie suspension. No one was certain if they could ever truly spring to life again. "I saw Kermit the Frog in *The Muppets Take Manhattan* the other day,'' Michael Frith, the company's executive vice president, said, "and he shone as a true movie star. Kermit was becoming richer and richer as the years wore on—

more layered, more multidimensional. When you try to figure out where this deep, welling sadness comes from, it's from the loss of Jim's talent.'' The seat of the Henson entertainment empire is an elegant brownstone in New York City that was built in 1928 as the home of a banking tycoon. It has since, as one staffer said, been "Muppetized." A central staircase curves around a mobile that features miniature Muppets cavorting up and down a series of hot-air balloons, and the building is crowned by a stained-glass skylight representing a swamp scene as it would be perceived by a low-lying frog.

The day I was there, not yet two weeks after Henson's death on May 16, a display cabinet in the entrance hall contained an empty director's chair, a photograph of Henson, and framed letters of sympathy from Ronald Reagan and President Bush. The Walt Disney Company, which had recently structured a deal to acquire Henson's company, his creative services and the rights to his non–*Sesame Street* characters, had sent over an outsize condolence card. On its cover, Mickey Mouse sat with his arm around the spindly shoulders of bereaved Kermit. Upstairs there was a growing file of letters from children. One of them read, "God must have needed Muppets in heaven." Stranded in the midst of all the playful decor—the Muppet wallpaper, the Kermit telephones, the plastic figures of Fozzie Bear or Gonzo or Big Bird in clusters on the window ledges and on the surfaces of every desk—Henson's colleagues were heartbroken and disoriented, still speaking of him half the time in the present tense, still waiting to be convinced he was really dead. With striking consistency, they remembered him as a "father figure" and, it seemed, almost as a spirit guide—a quiet, authoritative, beloved man without a trace of aggression.

"It's easy to eulogize somebody," said Frank Oz, who had been Bert to Henson's Ernie, Miss Piggy to his Kermit. "Jim was not perfect. But I'll tell you something—he was as close to how you're supposed to behave toward other people as anyone I've ever

The Henson family circa 1977, left to right: Cheryl, Jane, Brian, Jim, Heather (on Jim's shoulders), John, and Lisa. Opposite: With Kermit during an episode of Sesame Street *in 1970.*

known." The range of Henson's imperfections included a wandering eye for women and a cheerful lust for material objects. He was known for his Kermit-green Lotus, his many homes in New York, London, Greenwich and Malibu, and his classical antiques, which he proudly displayed alongside leftover props from various Muppet movies. And his famous consideration and patience could sometimes prove to be annoying traits when it came time for an urgent executive decision. But otherwise, he was as he appeared, and as one would have hoped him to be. He was playful, benign, tirelessly inventive, and only rarely a bit "snarky." (To express anger, he might turn the pages of a magazine faster than usual.) His favorite expression was "hmmmmmm."

He encouraged silliness and chaos. Like Kermit, the undaunted host of *The Muppet Show,* he needed a storm to be the calm center of. "Without Jim," Oz says, "I'm a pretty serious person at times. He was the leader, always, but he allowed us to play. We had so much fun. I can't begin to tell you the fun." Oz had worked with Henson for 26 years, since he was 19, and there are people willing to argue that the two of them had developed into a comedy team as enduring as Laurel and Hardy or Burns and Allen.

"What Jim saw," Jane Henson said, "is that the puppet is as powerful as a human being. And in fact is more powerful—less concerned about what it looks like, more direct, more able to go to the heart of things." Jim Henson changed puppets forever, changed them into Muppets. One look at Henson's creations, and few people ever wanted to see a stiff, dangling marionette again.

His puppets were designed for the close scrutiny of the television camera. Their eyes were uncannily expressive, and their wide mouths moved in perfect sync with their words. They did not just represent living beings—they were alive themselves. Or so we can't help believing. "There is something about putting life in the inanimate doll," Jane Henson said. "There's a bit of divinity in it that all puppeteers understand." That was the thought that kept coming back to me as, later that day, I went on a tour of the workshop where the Muppets are made.

Amid all those half-assembled creatures of flocked foam and slush latex, a puppetmaker named Ed Christie showed me a file cabinet where the characters from *Sesame Street*—the actual working Cookie Monsters and Oscars and Grovers—were kept when not in use. "Here's the real Bert," he said. "And down here is the real Ernie."

He took them out of their drawers and held them up, Bert with his familiar scowling face and ballistic-shaped head, Ernie with his idiot grin. In repose, their mouths open, their arms hanging idly at their sides, they were creepy. They seemed not only inert but bewitched, frozen under some dark spell.

And it seemed at that moment that only Jim Henson, whose genius had created them, and who was now gone, could ever release them. "That's all they are," Christie said. "Just lumps of fabric." I watched as he put Ernie back into the drawer, next to a Ziploc bag filled with spare rubber duckies, and closed the file. □

Kermit and Miss Piggy at the VIP screening of Muppets Most Wanted *on March 24, 2014, in London.*

CHAPTER

TWO

Their WIDE World

Across the globe, in stories and mysteries and tales festooned with holiday cheer, the Muppets, it sometimes seems, are everywhere.

The Muppets at the Movies

Though they got their start on television, the Muppets have graced the big screen eight times, bringing laughs, heart, and joy to the box office.

BY COURTNEY MIFSUD INTREGLIA

The Muppet Movie

1979

This movie-within-a-movie begins with Kermit relaxing in a swamp, strumming his banjo, when he's approached by a Hollywood agent. The film highlights Kermit's journey to become a showbiz sensation. Along the way, he makes some quirky new friends, including the feisty Miss Piggy and mirthful Fozzie Bear. As the group treks across America, they need to be on the lookout—because a sinister frog-legs merchant is after Kermit.

The Great Muppet Caper 1981

When jewel thieves steal a priceless diamond necklace from the esteemed Lady Holiday (played by Dame Diana Rigg), two intrepid *Daily Chronicle* reporters—a pair of twin brothers—travel to London to investigate the theft. These "twins" are none other than the petite green Kermit and the tawny, fluffy Fozzie Bear. When Miss Piggy is framed for the theft, Kermit and his team set off to track down and catch the real criminals themselves.

MANHATTAN
MELODIES
BILTMORE

The Muppets Take Manhattan 1984

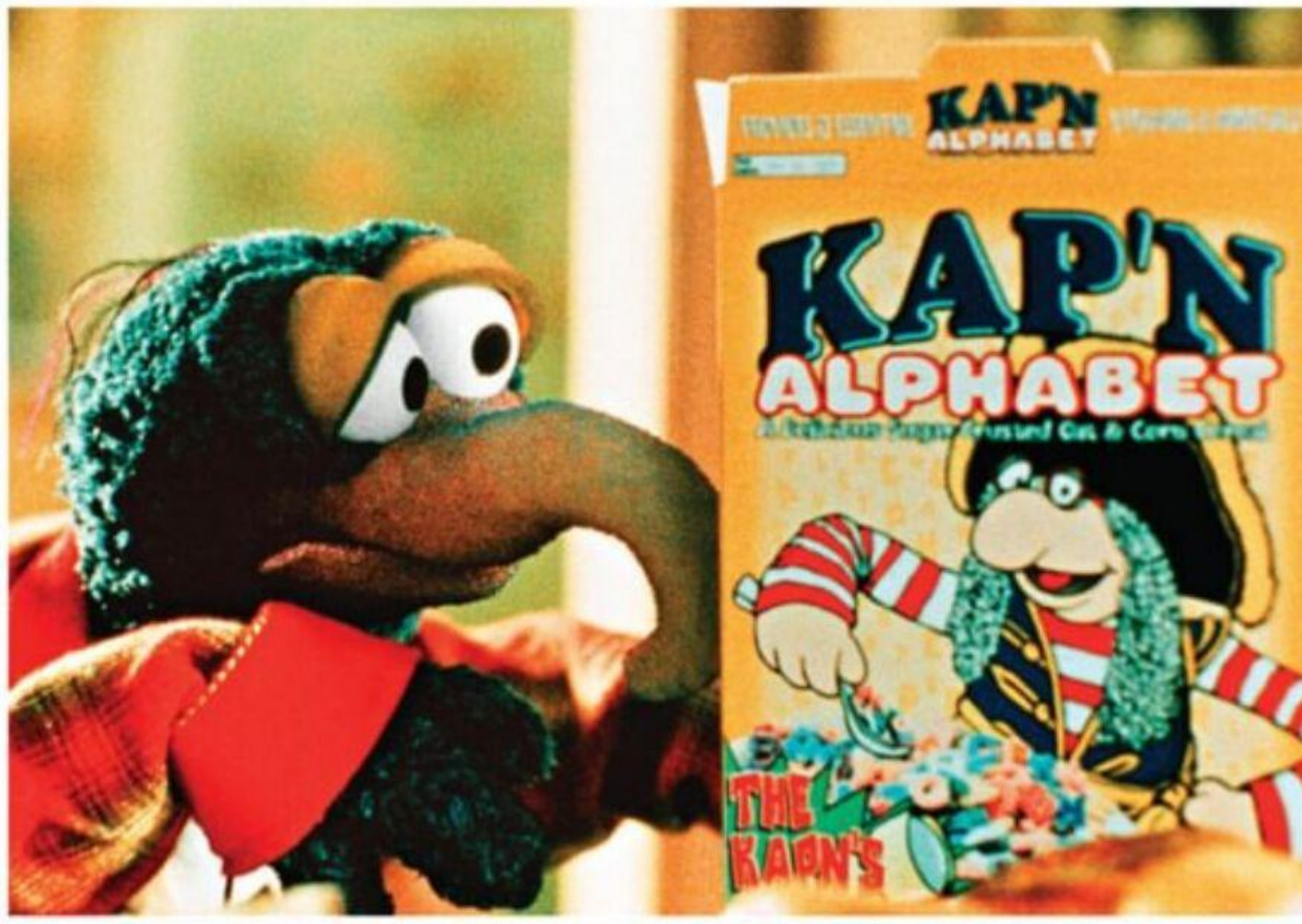
The franchise's third feature film was the first solely directed by Frank Oz. Fresh college graduates Kermit and friends set off to New York City to bring their musical act to Broadway. After months pass and their wallets empty, the group splits up to focus on their own endeavors. This movie includes the toddler-centric dream sequence that was used as the basis for the Saturday morning cartoon *Muppet Babies,* which ran from 1984 to 1991.

The Muppet Christmas Carol 1992

Our favorite felted friends honored the spirit of Christmas–past, present, and future–in this lighthearted adaptation of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol.* Gonzo, as Charles Dickens, narrates the tale, with Michael Caine playing Ebenezer Scrooge. The rest of the Muppets ensemble weave in and out of the story as the grumpy Scrooge communes with the famous Christmas spirits.

Muppet Treasure Island 1996

The Muppets take to the high seas in a thrilling adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Kevin Bishop stars as the protagonist Jim Hawkins, with Tim Curry as Long John Silver. When a former pirate hands Hawkins and his best buds, Gonzo and Rizzo, a treasure map, he leaves them with a warning: Beware the "One-Legged Man." The ensuing adventure includes a motley crew, several sea shanties, and tribal wild boars.

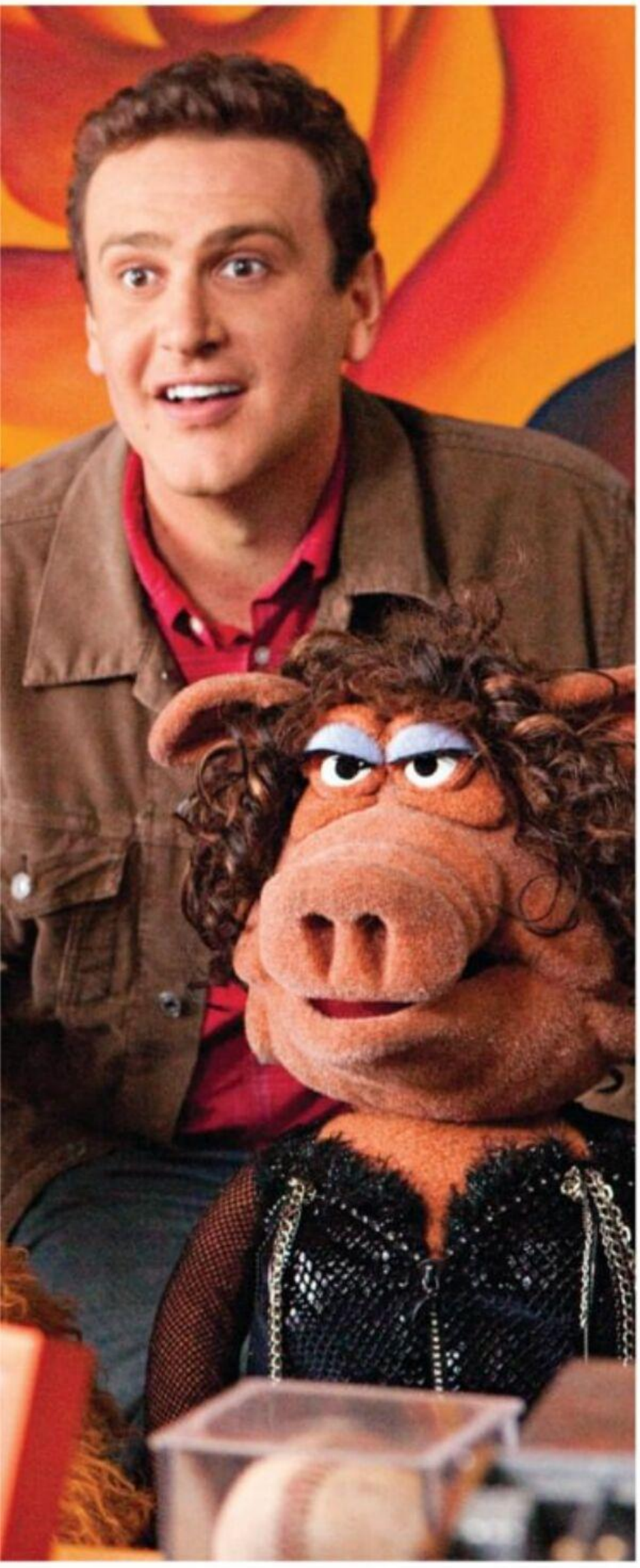


Muppets from Space 1999

Gonzo and his pals embark on a cosmic adventure in this zany science fiction comedy. After a pair of Cosmic Fish reveal that Gonzo isn't from Earth but instead an alien from outer space, Gonzo attempts to convince the world that aliens exist. He and Rizzo the Rat are captured by menacing government agent K. Edgar Singer (played by Jeffrey Tambor), and the gang sets out to rescue them. Shelley Snipes, anchor for UFO Mania (played by Andie MacDowell), grapples with Miss Piggy throughout the film.

The Muppets 2011

The seventh feature film introduces Walter, a new Muppet who happens to be the world's biggest Muppets fan. His friends Gary and Mary (portrayed by Jason Segel and Amy Adams) team up with Walter to save the vaudeville-era Muppet Theatre from oilman Tex Richman's clutches. To raise enough money, the trio unites the Muppet ensemble to put on the Greatest Muppet Telethon Ever.



Muppets Most Wanted 2014

The most recent feature film finds the Muppets embarking on a world tour. Little do they know that Constantine, the globe's most infamous criminal, is a Kermit look-alike. In Berlin, the villain switches places with Kermit, landing the fan favorite in prison while Constantine continues the tour.

A Musical Legacy

Since their earliest iterations, the Muppets have always had a penchant for tunes.

BY JED GOTTLIEB

"IT'S TIME TO PLAY THE MUSIC," SING A mouse in a prairie bonnet, a pig with flaming orange hair, and a pair of chickens.

It's not coincidental that "The Muppet Show Theme" begins with this lyric. Soon it will be time for sensational, inspirational, celebrational, Muppetational madness. But first, music.

With its crooning chickens, ivory-tickling Rowlf the Dog, and drum-bashing Animal, the theme song set *The Muppet Show*'s loony, joyous tone. From Kermit's "Bein' Green" to the Great Gonzo's "I'm Going to Go Back There Someday," from *Sesame Street* in the '70s through a dozen films and TV series, music has fed the magic and mischief of the Muppets.

Early on, Jim Henson found dancing and singing puppets a cheap, effective way to delight audiences. On his first show, *Sam and Friends,* which ran from 1955 to 1961 on Washington, D.C.'s NBC affiliate, his madcap Muppets did standards from "Old Black Magic" to "The Yellow Rose of Texas."

"He was generally not singing. He was lip-syncing to records," says Dave Goelz, who has performed Gonzo and other Muppets for 50 years. "But I guess he just absorbed what music could do for entertain-

The Electric Mayhem Band in the 2023 Disney series The Muppets Mayhem.

"Music is an essential part of everything we do," Jim Henson said of his Muppet productions. Opposite: Henson with songwriters Peter Matz (left) and Paul Williams in 1979.

ment, for comedy." Henson's emerging understanding of how music could fuel humor, heart, and hijinks spilled over into *Sesame Street*. But now, thanks to PBS funding, Henson's team had the budget and talent to create striking original songs.

Sesame Street's musical director Joe Raposo was a classically trained musician and Harvard graduate who wrote for Frank Sinatra and arranged for Fred Astaire. Raposo elevated children's music by making simple songs carry deep emotions and clever whimsy. And he pumped out these songs at a furious pace.

"He would receive the cans of film from the office, watch them overnight, and score them," son Nick Raposo said of the more than 3,000 pieces his father composed for the show. "He was in the studio or on set probably 18 hours a day." Raposo's crowning achievement was "Bein' Green." In the span of two minutes, the ballad takes Kermit from down in the dumps to triumphantly accepting his uniqueness. "Bein' Green" paired a relatable message with a pretty little melody so effortlessly that it became part of the Great American Songbook, covered by a list of legends including Frank Sinatra, Lena Horne, and Ray Charles.

Like Raposo, *Sesame Street* songwriter Jeff Moss wrote for specific voices that still had universal appeal. And he could write for anyone: Moss penned "Rubber Duckie" for Ernie and "Nasty Dan" for Johnny Cash. Between them, Raposo and Ross piled up a stack of favorites: "C Is for Cookie," "I Love Trash," an entire album of *Sesame* disco songs. They also taught generations the power of song.

"*Sesame Street* is one of the earliest examples of a musical I experienced," Lin-Manuel Miranda told the *New York Times*. "I learned from *Sesame Street* that music is not only incredibly fun but also an extremely effective narrative and teaching tool.... On top of that, their songs are the closest thing we have to a shared childhood songbook." The collection of icons who worked with *Sesame Street* is truly

unparalleled. Stevie Wonder taught Grover how to sing. Dizzy Gillespie jammed on bebop to blown-away 5-year-olds. R.E.M. gleefully turned "Shiny Happy People" into "Happy, Furry Monsters."

The unprecedented success of *Sesame Street* opened the door for the *The Muppet Show.* As a riff on a vaudeville variety show, Henson's new program depended even more on music. Debuting in 1976, the first season leaned on songs and stars from Broadway. But as it became a runaway smash, more and bigger rock stars realized a call from Kermit was a rite of passage. "I never had so much fun in my life as doing *The Muppet Show,*" shock-rock pioneer Alice Cooper remembers of his work on the 1978 Halloween special. "I said, 'Who's going to be on it?' And they said Christopher Lee, Vincent Price. And I went, 'I'm in!' I didn't even have to think about it. I went, 'I'm in. If those guys can do it, I am privileged to do it.'"

Cooper's fitting Halloween spot embodied how the show let guests be themselves while pushing them to take absurd artistic chances. Rocking "Crocodile Rock" in a swamp, Elton John out-Muppeted the Muppets in a costume with massive rainbow feathers that made him stand out beside the Technicolor hippies in the Electric Mayhem. Dressed in fringe, rhinestones, and a ten-gallon cowboy hat, Miss Piggy moseyed up to an enchanted Johnny Cash to sing June Carter Cash's part in "Jackson."

One legendary bit had Rita Moreno singing "Fever" with a worked-up Animal at his drum kit behind her. Not surprisingly, Animal gets too worked up, and Moreno needs to settle him down by crashing his head between two cymbals. You can see her barely holding in a laugh for half the sketch. "I'm usually so critical—but when I watch myself, I just laugh at *me,*" Moreno remembered. "What I love about it is that my character's trying so hard to be sexy and sultry. And this horrible creature in back of me is acting up. [*Laughs*] See? I can't stop laughing. It tickles me to death."

Even Prince, who had the reputation of being notoriously difficult to work with, was clearly charmed by the experience of being on '90s Muppets show *Muppets Tonight.* Prince's handlers had instructed the cast and crew not to talk to the icon or look him in the eye. "I thought that was silly," Bill Barretta says.

Barretta, who originated a dozen Muppet characters and inherited the roles of Rowlf the Dog, Dr. Teeth, and others after Henson's death, went right over to Prince and asked if he wanted to see the characters. And of course Prince wanted to meet Kermit, Miss Piggy, and the rest.

"He was such a sweet, sweet guy," Barretta says, even after a wonderful gag where Barretta as Bobo

the Bear razzed Prince about changing his name to an unpronounceable symbol. "Right away we just beat him over the head with his symbol name…. [But] he had a good sense of humor. He got the joke."

The Muppets could come up with memorable music moments without guests—see Gonzo telling the audience, "Tonight I will eat this rubber tire to the music of 'Flight of the Bumblebee!'" (Spoiler: Despite his grand ambitions set to an operatic orchestral interlude, Gonzo is booed off stage.) However, guest stars certainly helped. But by the time of 1979's *The Muppet Movie,* Gonzo, Kermit, and crew were the stars. They only needed songwriters who understood them.

Ace songwriters Paul Williams and Kenneth Ascher penned the *The Muppet Movie*'s immortal anthems. By the late '70s, both already had impressive careers — Williams wrote Three Dog Night's "An Old Fashioned Love Song," a handful of Carpenters hits, the lyrics to the *Love Boat* theme, and more; Ascher had arranged for everyone from John Lennon to Barbra Streisand.

Williams, who knew Henson from their collaboration on 1977 Muppet TV movie *Emmet Otter's Jug-Band Christmas,* told Henson he wouldn't keep him in the dark during *The Muppet Movie* songwriting process. Williams knew how important his job was and wanted to make sure Henson heard the songs, and had confidence in them, as he and Ascher were drafting them. "He said, 'Oh, Paul…you don't need to do that,'" Williams says. "[Henson] trusted his instincts on who he reached out to to work with. I saw it again and again with the Muppet performers. There was a creativity that wasn't only allowed but expected."

Williams and Ascher rewarded Henson's trust with lasting songs that defined characters, set moods, and induced belly laughs. The misfits in the Electric Mayhem jam to "Can You Picture That?," something between a groovy Doobie Brothers track and the funk of New Orleans keyboard wizard Dr. John (the inspiration for Mayhem leader Dr. Teeth). Lounge pianist Rowlf the Dog offers up the lyrical wisdom "What could be better than a saucy Irish setter when puppy love comes on strong?/Or a collie that's classy, a laddie needs a lassie/A lover and wife gives you a new leash on life" in "I Hope That Somethin' Better Comes Along."

Topping them all, the tenderness and longing of "The Rainbow Connection" came to represent Kermit's gentle soul and eternal optimism. "The first thing we wrote was 'Rainbow Connection'—talk

Above: Rita Moreno and Miss Piggy during the Muppets Go Hollywood *special (1979). Opposite, on* The Muppet Show, *from top: Elton John (1978), Julie Andrews performing "The Lonely Goatherd" (1978), Johnny Cash with Miss Piggy (1981), and Debbie Harry (1981).*

about setting a bar for ourselves," Williams says. "[Reading the script, we see] Kermit in the swamp, and what does he have with the swamp? He has water, he has light, he has refracted light, he has rainbows."

Like so many others, Williams found the Muppets to be much more than stitching and stuffing. He recalls that Henson's attempts to record "Rainbow Connection" without Kermit in his arms lacked a certain magic. He seemed to need to have Kermit with him to sing the song fully. "I can close my eyes and see Jim Henson in the studio with Kermit," Williams says. "There was something about Jim with Kermit when he did the vocal for 'Rainbow Connection' that just went 'Bang!'"

When character and song connect, everything clicks. Even when, or maybe especially when, the Muppet performers sing with those unvarnished creaks and croaks in their throats.

"That's part of the secret sauce," Goelz says. "These are not professional singers. They're not professional anythings, these characters. They're just a band of crazy people that Kermit picked up on his way across the country. And there's something so accessible about that."

From *Sam and Friends* to *The Muppets Mayhem* (Disney+'s deeply underrated 2023 series about the Muppet house band's quest to make its debut album), the music from the Muppets has enchanted the world over and over again. "The Rainbow Connection" alone has been covered by Weezer, Willie Nelson, Barbra Streisand, and Gwen Stefani.

Well, the music has enchanted most of the world. Mayhem bassist Floyd Pepper never could stand "The Muppet Show Theme." One episode of the show opens with Floyd positively outraged at the thought of having to perform the theme every night ad nauseam. "I just can't take it anymore," he tells Kermit. "It's embarrassingly square, and I don't play square." Thankfully, Floyd decides not to quit the show. And thankfully, nobody else agrees with his take on the tune. ☐

Robin (Kermit's nephew, in the part of Tiny Tim) led the Cratchit family in a rendition of "Bless us All" as Miss Piggy (Emily Cratchit) served roast goose.

Making a Holiday Classic

The Muppets sat down for an interview to reminisce about *The Muppet Christmas Carol* on the film's 30th anniversary.

BY MAUREEN LEE LENKER

From *Entertainment Weekly*, December 2, 2022

FOR MANY, A FAVORITE HOLIDAY tradition is sitting down to watch 1992's *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, an adaptation of Charles Dickens' classic story with Michael Caine as Ebenezer Scrooge and the Muppets as the remaining cast of characters, including Gonzo as Dickens himself.

The classic, which uses more of Dickens' original text than any other cinematic adaptation, turns 30 this holiday season—and in honor of 30 years of Kermit watching a shooting star, Miss Piggy taste-testing the Christmas goose, and Gonzo and Rizzo slamming into the side of a chapel, we got the gang back together to reminisce about their memories of making the film.

To oversee the merriment, No. 1 Muppets fan Brett Goldstein, *Ted Lasso*'s costar and writer (and if you haven't watched his one-man Muppet Christmas Carol, you really need to get thee to YouTube stat), sat down with the cast. Let's honor Christmas in our hearts and try to keep it all the year as Kermit, Miss Piggy, Robin, and Gonzo take us—and Goldstein—through their Christmases Past, Present, and Future.

BRETT GOLDSTEIN: What a joy to see you all — you haven't aged a bit. Do you have a favorite memory or moment from the film? Should we start with you, Kermit?

KERMIT: For me, the best memory, it's being together. It was the first movie that we'd made in quite a few years. It gave us a chance to play and to have fun. It's the best part of everything we do. Isn't that right, guys?

MISS PIGGY: For me, it was how Sir Michael Caine let me borrow his Oscar. Mikey, I promise I will give it back to you very soon…maybe.

ROBIN: My favorite part was when Tiny Tim did not die.

GOLDSTEIN: Oh, man. I think a lot of people really, really, really like that part.

KERMIT: Gonzo?

GONZO: My favorite part? Being Charles Dickens, a great author whose last name rhymes with chickens. Let's face it. I was perfect for the part.

KERMIT: You sure were.

GOLDSTEIN: Was that how they sold you on it, Gonzo? They just said, "Do this, it rhymes with chickens," and you were like, "I'm in"?

GONZO: Yeah, plus I got to go to London.

GOLDSTEIN: What was that like?

GONZO: Oh, it's great. I've been there a lot before, but I love it. I got lots of friends there. I go out in the country and visit farms. Piggy and I go out and visit farms together.

MISS PIGGY: What?

GONZO: I visit the chickens. She visits the pigs.

MISS PIGGY: That is not true! You're making things up.

KERMIT: Maybe move on to the next question, Brett, before things get heated.

GOLDSTEIN: Thank you, Kermit, for keeping things on track. Do you guys have a favorite moment in the film?

KERMIT: The skating on the ice. That was a lot of fun, especially for a frog. We haven't had ice in the swamp since the Precambrian era, so that was a real treat for me.

GOLDSTEIN: You were a very good skater.

GONZO: And you're very old too.

KERMIT: What?

GONZO: Well, you go back to the Precambrian era.

KERMIT: No, no, no, no. I'm just saying that we have not had ice in the swamp since then. That's what I've been told. It's old frog lore. Don't you have any lore from your…whatevers?

GONZO: I don't know any other whatevers.

KERMIT: How about Robin, what about you? Do you have a favorite moment from the film?

ROBIN: Oh, gee. There were so many. I liked the whole movie. Actually, one of the most difficult parts for me was pretending that Uncle Kermit was my father. I kept calling him Uncle Kermit instead of Father Dad.

KERMIT: That's OK. You did a great job.

MISS PIGGY: I think my favorite moment was letting loose on Scrooge and telling him what I thought of him. Everybody credits those three ghosts for changing his attitude, but I think it was moi yelling at him that really made him change.

GOLDSTEIN: That sounds right.

GONZO: My favorite moment was flying across London with the Ghost of Christmas Past. You really haven't lived until you've hit a church steeple at 60 miles an hour.

MISS PIGGY: I don't know, I've never done that and I feel like I've lived.

GOLDSTEIN: Which Muppet would you say is the biggest Scrooge?

KERMIT: Well, Brett, sometimes Statler and Waldorf, who play Marley and Marley, they can be a lot like Scrooge. But the truth is, they're really good guys. Don't you guys think they are?

GONZO: Well, they must be. They come to every one of our performances.

KERMIT: That's right.

ROBIN: I always thought they were being punished for something.

KERMIT: No.

MISS PIGGY: As for the spirit of Christmas, though, I would have to say that Kermit captures that. I really do. Yes, Kermit and I have our differences, but he's still the kindest, sweetest frog I know.

KERMIT: It kind of feels like there's a "but" coming.

MISS PIGGY: Why but? No but.

KERMIT: No but?

MISS PIGGY: He could stand to wear some clothes every now and then.

KERMIT: I knew it was coming—there you go.

"WE'D ALWAYS WANTED TO DO A CHRISTMAS MOVIE, AND FOR A STORY, YOU CAN'T DO ANY BETTER THAN DICKENS' *A CHRISTMAS CAROL*. RIGHT?"

—Kermit the Frog

Brett Goldstein interviewing the Muppets for Entertainment Weekly *in 2022.*

GOLDSTEIN: One of the things I love about the film is that it's genuinely pretty scary. Was there anything you held back on?

KERMIT: Well, we were a little bit worried about the ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. It's a very frightening character. Fun fact here, and this is a scoop, Brett, but I actually was up for that part.

GOLDSTEIN: Really?

KERMIT: Yeah. But when Michael Caine turned around and saw me, he couldn't stop giggling, so we changed it up a bit there.

MISS PIGGY: Yeah, you're not very intimidating.

GONZO: You're reassuring.

ROBIN: I just had to cover my eyes during that whole part. In fact, Mr. Brett, please let me know when you're done with this question.

GOLDSTEIN: OK, I will.

ROBIN: I'm going to hide behind my cocoa.

GONZO: Well, I think the scariest part of making the movie was at the table read, when Miss Piggy found out she wasn't playing the lead.

MISS PIGGY: Yeah, sure, I would've preferred being the lead actress, but I was willing to settle for a best supporting actress award. Not that I got one.

GONZO: But in the moment, it was scary. She's not telling it quite right.

ROBIN: This isn't as scary as I thought it was going to be.

GOLDSTEIN: You can come out from behind the cup. What's your favorite song in the film? Do you have a favorite?

ROBIN: Oh, I enjoy the overture by Mr. Paul Williams. It opens with the mournful clarinet, but also "Thankful Heart."

KERMIT: Yeah, they're all great, in my opinion. It all comes down to our good friend Paul Williams. It was the first time that we'd worked with him since *The Muppet Movie*. Paul, he's always been able to take a special feeling and turn it into beautiful music. If you ask me, Paul and [composer] Miles Goodman made every one of those songs a new classic.

MISS PIGGY: Oh, I agree with Kermit, but if I had to pick one song, then I choose "It Feels Like Christmas." I've always believed that every day should feel like Christmas: joy, glad tidings, and especially—

KERMIT: Lots of presents.

MISS PIGGY: That's right, Kermit. How did you know?

KERMIT: Well, I've known you a long time.

Above: At Fozziwig's Christmas party, Scrooge meets a young woman named Belle and falls in love. Opposite: Kermit and Robin as Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim.

GOLDSTEIN: What about you, Gonzo? What's your favorite song?

GONZO: Well, I'm with Kermit. They're all great songs. I'm a little bit disappointed, though, that my big solo number, "I'm Charles Dickens and You're Not," got cut from the final film.

GOLDSTEIN: Do any of you know why this film is such an enduring classic?

MISS PIGGY: Because I'm in it. Next question!

KERMIT: There is that, Miss Piggy, but I think that it's such a perfect story about redemption and being grateful for everything that life has given you.

GONZO: As Charles Dickens, let me just say, thank you for the compliment.

GOLDSTEIN: This was the first film the Muppets had made that was not an original story. What was it about *A Christmas Carol* that made you guys think, This is a good fit for the Muppets?

KERMIT: Well, we'd always wanted to do a Christmas movie, and for a story, you can't do any better than Dickens' *A Christmas Carol.* Right? Redemption, gratitude, and you mix that with the Muppets' silliness, and you've got yourself a good fit.

MISS PIGGY: To be honest, I really wanted to do *It's a Wonderful Moi,* but there was a lot of pushback. I wasn't going to jump off a bridge or anything, anyhow, so it's just as well.

GONZO: Well, I think it was a good fit because of two words: public domain. As Charles Dickens, I know. They didn't have to pay me a cent.

GOLDSTEIN: So Gonzo, playing Charles Dickens is not the normal part you are known for playing. What challenges did portraying that writer give you?

GONZO: The handwriting. Quill pens can make a lot of curlicues and flourishes. To be honest, I had to use a stunt calligrapher.

KERMIT: I didn't know they had those.

GOLDSTEIN: Robin, You play Bob and Emily's son, Tiny Tim. It's a heartbreaking performance. I can't hear the sound of coughing without crying. I wondered how difficult it was to achieve that performance, whether there were versions you tried in rehearsal that you didn't use?

ROBIN: Well, I tried one interpretation of Tiny Tim where he was a WWE wrestler and wrestled Mr. Scrooge. That got pretty quickly rejected. But as for the cough, well, growing up in a swamp, coughing is easy, especially when the horsefly goes down the

wrong pipe. [*Coughs*] Excuse me.

GOLDSTEIN: Oh, Robin, please don't cough.

ROBIN: I'm sorry, Mr. Brett.

GOLDSTEIN: Let's talk about Michael Caine. One of the great performances of all time. He should have won an Oscar for that. What was it like working with him? Did you learn anything from him? Did he learn anything from you guys?

GONZO: Well, what I remember about working with Michael was having a sore neck. He was very tall, and I always had to look up at him.

KERMIT: Michael was fantastic. He took the role very seriously, which is hard to do when you're surrounded by singing bears and pigs and whatevers. He seemed to enjoy working with us from the very first day.

ROBIN: He even came back the second day.

KERMIT: That's right.

MISS PIGGY: That's how you know he's a great actor.

GOLDSTEIN: So tell me how the music came about. Was Paul Williams left to his own devices, or did any of you help?

KERMIT: Well, yeah, Paul, he read the original story and the script. In fact, he may be the only one who ever did read the script.

MISS PIGGY: There was a script?

KERMIT: Anyway, like I said, Paul has got an incredibly amazing ability to take feelings and take a moment and emotion and turn it into the perfect song. And all we had to do is sing. Right?

ROBIN: And try to stay in tune.

GOLDSTEIN: Kermit, do you still count the number of sleeps until Christmas?

KERMIT: Oh, of course, I do. Doesn't everybody?

ROBIN: Boy, I sure do.

MISS PIGGY: For moi, every day is Christmas.

GONZO: Yeah, she's very big on getting presents. Brett, I just hope you brought some.

MISS PIGGY: Oh, did you bring me a present?

GOLDSTEIN: Uh…

KERMIT: [*leans over to whisper*] Say it's in the car.

GOLDSTEIN: I did, and it's in the car, and when I leave I'll get it.

MISS PIGGY: Oh, good, I can't wait, I can't wait.

GOLDSTEIN: Robin and Kermit, the Christmas scat that you do—I could listen to an entire album of that. How do you feel about it?

ROBIN: It was great fun. Did you know the whole thing was improvised? But it was based in part on that old amphibian holiday folk song, "Froggy Went a Scat Singing."

KERMIT: Yeah, yeah. We all learned it as tadpoles, and I'm pretty sure that's available on Splashify.

GOLDSTEIN: Can we get a snippet? Three, two, one…

KERMIT AND ROBIN: "Froggy went a scattin', he did ride, ribbit, ribbit…"

KERMIT: Do you want us to keep singing? It's the same words over and over.

GOLDSTEIN: I don't want you two to ever stop.

KERMIT: It's very repetitive.

ROBIN: It's a folk song.

GOLDSTEIN: Robin, "Bless Us All" is such an emotional song. I can't hear it without crying. How do you get through it?

ROBIN: Aw. Well, gee, I was so nervous, I just wanted to get it right. But gee whiz, if you need to have a

good cry here, you can borrow my hanky.
GOLDSTEIN: Thank you very much.
ROBIN: Okay, here we go. [*Begins to sing "Bless Us All"*]
KERMIT: No, no, no. We don't want Brett to cry.
ROBIN: Oh gee, I'm sorry, Mr. Brett.
GOLDSTEIN: It's all right. You have a real power.
KERMIT: It does feel good though, doesn't it?
GOLDSTEIN: Yeah. Gonzo, you are famously a stunt artist, and you put your body through a lot doing this film—falling out of windows, smashing into churches, all sorts of things. But actually, Rizzo is put through a lot worse. What was the most serious injury you sustained on set? And what was the hardest stunt to film?
GONZO: You know, as an actor, I use the Stanislavski method. He always told us, "If it doesn't hurt, it's not acting, and if it does hurt, you don't have to act."
KERMIT: Wait a second, Gonzo. You're saying that you learned that from Stanislavski?
GONZO: Yep, good old Crash Stanislavski.
KERMIT: Different Stanislavski. OK, got it. I'm sorry, Brett. Next question.
GOLDSTEIN: OK. Can we talk about the song "When Love Is Gone"? There were some times when it was cut, and sometimes it was back in. What do you guys think? Is that song canon?
GONZO: Well, if I had any idea it was cannon, I would have made them keep it in the movie.
MISS PIGGY: I still say it would have been better if I sang it.
KERMIT: You say that about every song, and Gonzo, it's a different kind of cannon.
GONZO: Oh, not the boom-boom?
KERMIT: No, not the boom-boom.
GOLDSTEIN: I hope you don't think this is weird, but this film is my Christmas tradition. I watch it every Christmas Eve. Do you have a favorite holiday tradition?
KERMIT: Getting together with friends.
GONZO: Falling down the chimney.
MISS PIGGY AND ROBIN: Opening my presents!
ROBIN: Oh, ha ha!
MISS PIGGY: I guess we have the same tradition.
GOLDSTEIN: The message of the story is to keep the generous spirit of Christmas in your heart all year round. What are the ways you try to do that or would encourage others to do?
KERMIT: Well, I would encourage people to spread the spirit with gratitude. Be thankful every day for your family and friends, whether they are frogs or pigs or bears or humans. And if we appreciate all of that, everything that we've got, it

Above: Michael Caine as Ebenezer Scrooge. Opposite: Gonzo (as Charles Dickens) and his friend Rizzo the Rat narrate the movie.

will be a much happier world.

ROBIN: You took my answer, Uncle Kermit.

KERMIT: Well, you know, I think it's kind of a universal answer.

ROBIN: It's a good one.

MISS PIGGY: I think you can keep Christmas in your heart all year round, and it's easy. Especially if you never take down your decorations.

KERMIT: That is true.

GONZO: Well, I would say love yourself and appreciate the weirdness in others.

GOLDSTEIN: One last quick question. What is the best line in cinema history, and is it "No cheeses for us meeses"?

ROBIN: No, it's "Every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings."

KERMIT: That's pretty good there. I've got "Here's looking at you, kid." That's pretty good, right? That's my Bogart.

ROBIN: What is that?

KERMIT: That's Humphrey Bogart.

GONZO: Those are great, but my favorite is "You're going to need a bigger boat."

MISS PIGGY: Or, how about "All right, Mr. DeMille. I'm ready for my close-up."

GOLDSTEIN: *Muppet Sunset Boulevard*?

MISS PIGGY: Ooh, I like it. We'll pitch that one at the same time as we pitch *Pride and Prejudice*.

GOLDSTEIN: What a double bill.

KERMIT: Good luck to you.

GOLDSTEIN: Thank you. You going to produce?

KERMIT: Oh sure, if you'll have me.

GOLDSTEIN: 100 percent.

KERMIT: All right, let's do it. I think the package is getting better and better.

GOLDSTEIN: It really is. That is all we have time for today. I want to thank the Muppets for making my dream come true. Have a wonderful holiday, and lastly, Robin?

ROBIN: God bless us, every one! □

Kermit and Miss Piggy dressed up as each other in Muppets Haunted Mansion *(2021).*

CHAPTER

THREE

The Muppets FOREVER

After a star-studded creative reboot and new corporate ownership, the Muppets entered their second, even more lucrative act.

New Set, New Magic

In 2011, TIME visited the set of the eighth Muppets feature film, Disney's creative reboot of the franchise.

BY JOEL STEIN

From TIME, November 23, 2011

In The Muppets, *left to right: Floyd Pepper, Fozzie Bear, Lew Zealand, Janice, the Swedish Chef, Camilla the Chicken, Dr. Bunsen Honeydew, Gonzo, Scooter, Beaker, and Dr. Teeth.*

I'M NOT SURE WHETHER THE VIBE IS coming from the Muppets or from Jason Segel, but everyone is really happy on this set. Actually, I'm not sure there's much of a difference between the Muppets and Segel, the star and co-writer of the new Muppets movie. Between takes, Segel out-Muppets the actual Muppets, his grin still Kermit-wide long after the real Kermit the Frog closes his mouth and collapses around puppeteer Steve Whitmire's hand. In the right opera balcony above the stage—which looks a lot like the original *Muppet Show* set—crusty Muppet critics Statler and Waldorf shake their heads disapprovingly at Segel's enthusiasm. In the left opera balcony, the movie's producers shake their heads too. "If you could peel away Jason's skin," says producer Todd Lieberman, "there might be felt underneath."

Segel took a lot of meetings with studios after the success of the Judd Apatow–produced comedy *Forgetting Sarah Marshall,* which Segel wrote and starred in. He played a frustrated puppet-musical playwright who, in the movie's most famous scene, gets dumped by his girlfriend while he's full-fron-

tally naked. When Segel got to Disney, he pitched his idea for a movie with the Muppets, who had lost their way in the decades following the 1990 death at age 53 of Jim Henson, their creator and the original voice of Kermit. They hadn't had a theatrical release since the less-than-blockbuster *Muppets from Space* in 1999. "I had come off of all these R-rated Judd Apatow movies," says Segel, who also appeared in Apatow's *Knocked Up*. "They kind of chuckled. I think they thought I was kidding."

But when Segel said he wanted to make a Muppet movie, he meant it. The script for *The Muppets* is sweet, old-fashioned, and smart, much like the beloved first three Muppet movies. Segel plays Gary, a super-positive, super-naive guy from a Pleasantville-type town who goes to Los Angeles with his girlfriend (Amy Adams) to meet the Muppets, only to find they have disbanded. Miss Piggy is in Paris, where she is the plus-size editor of *French Vogue*. Gonzo runs a plumbing company in upstate New York, Animal is in rehab for anger management, Fozzie is in Vegas in a Muppets cover band called the Moopets, and Kermit is in Howard Hughes–esque exile in his Bel Air mansion.

"They're all pretty lonely and miss their friends," says Nicholas Stoller, who directed *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* and co-wrote *The Muppets* with Segel. "If this were real life, it wouldn't work. It would be weird Facebook friend requests from people you went to junior high with."

But these being the Muppets—and this being Segel's lifelong fantasy—they get back together to put on a show and save their old studio from Tex Richman (Chris Cooper), an evil baron who wants the oil underneath it. On the set today, Cooper yells at Kermit with such ferocity and stomps so convincingly around the stage off camera that some mistakenly think he's spending the entire shoot in character as the villain.

For a large group of comedians who grew up in the 1970s and '80s, "the Muppets were the gateway drug to comedy," Stoller says. "You'd try it, and you'd want more of it, so you'd try *Monty Python* and *Saturday Night Live*. Then you'd fall down the rabbit hole. They're so self-aware, and there are jokes flying everywhere. They're like *The Simpsons* without cynicism."

It's been a while since there has been money resting on the Muppets: the past 20 years haven't been kind to them. There were direct-to-DVD films. Miss Piggy did Pizza Hut commercials. Felt gathered dust. "I'm probably a bigger fan of what I grew up watching than what I've been a part of," says Eric Jacobson, who has played Miss Piggy (as well as Fozzie Bear, Animal and Sam the Eagle) since 2001. But a real-world need for Muppets kept simmering.

Even a snarky gossipmonger like Perez Hilton, a recent visitor to the set, gets a little Muppety around the Muppets. "He was a really nice guy," says Walter, a boyish new Muppet, who in the movie is Gary's best friend from their small town and likewise idolizes the Muppets. "Perez asked me if I was involved in any scandals. I said, 'Not any that I know, but I'm sure you'll tell me if I have.'"

Surprisingly, it's not that strange to interview a Muppet. Peter Linz, who plays Walter, doesn't feel weird talking to me with his hand in my face. So I don't either. The rule is that you have to ask to interview the Muppet and its handler at separate times, even though I can totally see that Linz's hand is up there.

"Watching The Muppet Show *shaped what I find funny," said* The Muppets *director James Bobin (above, with Segel). Opposite, from top: Segel with Walter, a newly introduced Muppet; Fozzie Bear, Miss Piggy, and Kermit.*

In fact, sometimes it's weirder looking right into Segel's wide-open, happy eyes. Even with all this Muppet love on set, Segel's Muppetphilia seems a little intense.

"I have somebody on watch outside my trailer because he's so into the Muppets and moi," Miss Piggy says. "I'm thinking of getting a restraining order." Amy Adams can sing every lyric of every song I can name from 1979's *The Muppet Movie*—and even she was freaked out. "You kind of sign on to the man-child thing when you work with Jason," she says. "The only creepy thing is the idea of whoever marries him. Every time we have a new thing on the set, he says, 'Do we own that? Do I own that? Can I own that?' I told him, 'You can't have the *Muppet Show* sign over your driveway. You'll never get married.'"

At one of his first meetings at Disney, the executives brought out some Muppets, and Segel immediately stopped paying attention, putting a Muppet on his hand and playing with it until Stoller got him to stop.

Segel says he has watched *The Muppet Movie* more than 50 times—and that was before he even thought about pitching a new version. "I relate to the Muppets on a very deep level," he says. "They care about being nice to people. I don't really care about much besides being nice." For example, when a fan asked Segel to officiate at his wedding, Segel got a license online and performed the ceremony on *The Tonight Show.* He is thoughtful, cheery, and calm and wants to make comedy that's much the same way, if that's possible.

It hasn't been for a long time. "There was a Christopher Guest mocking comedy wave, a Farrelly brothers gross-out comedy wave, a cringe-factor wave," Segel says. "The Muppets stuck around by not being cynical."

And now Disney is spending $50 million on a movie with singing and puppets and old friends saving the day by putting on a show! Either Segel knows something about America that the rest of us don't, or he's about to go back to full-frontal nudity. ☐

The Muppets in the Mouse House

The Disney connection: how Kermit and Mickey came together under the same roof.

BY CHRIS NASHAWATY

FOR THE PAST 20 YEARS, THE WALT Disney Company has been on a spending spree unlike anything Hollywood has ever seen. In 2006, the studio made headlines by acquiring Pixar, the forward-looking digital animation startup that had single-handedly pushed the medium into the future with such hits as *Toy Story, Monsters, Inc.*, and *Finding Nemo*. The price tag? Somewhere in the neighborhood of $7.4 billion. Then, in 2009, Disney checked off the next item on its wish list, purchasing Marvel Entertainment Inc. and its stable of sequel-happy superheroes for $4 billion. Finally, in 2012, the company shocked Tinseltown one last time by gobbling up Lucasfilm Ltd., George Lucas's money-minting production company and custodian of all things Star Wars and Indiana Jones, for $4.05 billion. In the dizzying aftermath of these three record-shattering, industry-disrupting deals, Disney's fabled backlot in Burbank was no longer just the "Happiest Place on Earth," it was also the place with the biggest checkbook.

Looking back now, however, there was another deal—a much more modest but no less significant

Floyd Pepper, Dr. Teeth, Animal, Zoot, Lilly Singh, Lips, Tahj Mowry, Janice in The Muppets Mayhem *(2023).*

In the third episode of the 2015 series The Muppets, *the friendship between Fozzie and Kermit takes center stage. Opposite, from top:* Muppet Babies *(2018) and* Muppets Now *(2020).*

one, signed just prior to that frenzied M&A trifecta —that would end up both announcing Disney's next-generation ambitions and symbolizing the dawn of its incipient second golden age. It was a deal that would have a seismic impact on the worlds of kids' television and movies and involve some of the biggest personalities in pop culture: namely, a haughty pig, a benevolent frog, and a menagerie of their closest felt-covered friends.

In 2004, Disney would fork over millions to permanently move the Muppets into the Mouse House. In the moment, the pact certainly seemed like a win-win proposition. The Jim Henson Company, still reeling from the 1990 death of its 53-year-old founder and fearless leader, had found a loving home for its lovable merry-prankster children. Said Jim Henson's daughter and co-chair and co-CEO of the Jim Henson Company, Lisa Henson, at the time: "The deal we announced today is the realization of my father's dream and ensures that the Muppet characters will live, flourish, and continue to delight audiences everywhere, forever." As for Disney, it now had something else: a virtually bottomless well of kid-friendly IP to tap into and expand for generations to come. Two decades later, it seems like a good time to check back in on this historic merger and see how it's played out and what it's produced.

Just as Lisa Henson and her famous father had wished, the Muppets did end up finding a welcoming new home in Burbank. At first, their new owners may not have known quite what to do with their new tenants, but after a slow start, Miss Piggy and Kermit —not to mention Fozzie and Animal and Beaker— haven't had much time to rest. Since Disney unofficially rebooted the franchise with the star-studded 2011 big-screen release *The Muppets* ($165 million at the global box office), it has feverishly rolled out a 2014 theatrical sequel, *Muppets Most Wanted* ($80.3 million), and an entire library of new and classic Muppets movies and shows. All this while strategically extending the brand's furry footprint ever further into the lucrative worlds of licensing and merchandising. Even a pair of cranks like Statler and Waldorf couldn't bellyache about that.

Not surprisingly, the massive engine driving the latest round of Muppet mania is the company's streaming platform, Disney+. Launched in late 2019, Disney+ is one of the only major streaming platforms that has been able to compete with Netflix in the post-cable era. With more almost 125 million monthly subscribers (compared with Netflix's 300 million), Disney+ isn't just some musty, mothball-scented repository where the studio can dump its past hits and let them gather dust. It's a prolific generator of original content that also includes the fruits of the studio's deals with Pixar (*Soul, Turning Red*), Marvel (*WandaVision, The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*), and Lucasfilm (*The Mandalorian, Andor*).

As for the Muppets, Disney+ has become the comprehensive one-stop shop for all things felt-related. In fact, the streaming platform currently has so many Muppets options on its menu, it would make the Swedish Chef green with envy. In addition to serving up the franchise's reputation-making classics, including all five seasons of *The Muppet Show* (1976–1981), pure catnip for nostalgic Gen Xers, there are also the six pre-Disney Muppets movies, from 1979's franchise starter *The Muppet Movie* to 1999's intergalactic coda *Muppets from Space*. Less familiar to older fans, however, is the buffet of more recent, made-for-Disney+ Muppets originals, which have managed to make the brand as relevant today as it's ever been.

The earliest signs of a Muppets resurgence came in 2009 with a viral music video that had the gang covering Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody." It would go on to win two Webby Awards and rack up more than 185 million views on YouTube. The table was set for a renaissance. That renaissance would arrive in earnest with the 2011 franchise-revitalizing big-screen smash *The Muppets,* which starred Amy Adams and longtime Muppet fanatic Jason Segel. The movie wasn't just was a welcome blast from the past for a generation that had grown up on all things Henson (including non-Muppets titles like *Fraggle Rock, The Dark Crystal,* and *Labyrinth*)—it ended up successfully introducing a new character (Walter) and winning a best original song Oscar for "Man or Muppet" at the 2012 Academy Awards.

Critics and fans (both old and new) didn't just approve, they wanted more, ASAP! In an effort to feed this insatiable new appetite, Disney would end up doubling down with the short-lived original series *The Muppets*. Initially airing on the Disney-owned ABC on September 22, 2015, *The Muppets* is a mockumentary-style show offering a behind-the-scenes (or is it behind-the-seams?) look at the gang's off-screen lives. The show never quite caught on in its network slot, and it was canceled after a single 16-episode season. Fortunately, *The Muppets* proved to have a long tail due to its second life on Disney+, where its show-within-a-show, *Up Late with Miss Piggy,* finally answered the question: What would *The Tonight Show* look like if it was hosted by the biggest porcine diva on the planet? Make no mistake, *The Muppets* is a kids' show all the way. But there are more than enough fourth-wall-breaking bits of meta-hilarity in the style of *The Office* and *Modern Family* to hold parents' attention as well.

The next trial balloon to get off the ground in the Disney era turned out to be the highly anticipated reboot of *Muppet Babies*. The show's fondly remembered first iteration aired on Saturday mornings on CBS from 1984 until 1991. Over eight seasons and 107 episodes, the animated show targeting kids in the 2- to 5-year-old age demo imagined Henson's beloved characters as toddlers all growing up as play

pals in the same nursery (for the record, little Fozzie is particularly adorable!). This wasn't the first time fans got a peek at what Kermit might have looked like shortly after his tadpole stage. That idea was initially conceived for a dream sequence in 1984's *The Muppets Take Manhattan*.

It's hard to say whether *Muppet Babies* ultimately went dark because of lackluster ratings or because even Muppets must go through the better-left-unseen awkwardness of puberty. But either way, the show would continue to live on only in the pixie-dust memories of its original pint-size fan base until 2018, when Disney gave the show another shot. Airing on the company's Disney Jr. channel, *Muppet Babies* 2.0 lasted for three seasons (71 episodes) before finally being sunset in 2022.

Ever since Disney's acquisition of the Muppets in 2004, the studio had wrestled with how to bring Henson's creature creations into the present. To fans, it often felt like Disney was too focused on its other shiny new toys from the Marvel Cinematic Universe and a certain galaxy far, far away to have much bandwidth left to figure out what to do with the Muppets. But in the summer of 2020, the Mouse House would finally focus and create *Muppets Now,* the studio's first Muppets original production for Disney+.

The unscripted and improvisational short-form series air-dropped the Muppets into a variety of comic scenarios, including wacky cooking-show segments with the Swedish Chef, Pepe the King Prawn's quiz shows, and lifestyle tips from Miss Piggy. It lasted just six episodes before the plug was pulled. That said, *Muppets Now* is well worth checking out, especially if you were ever curious what *Saturday Night Live* would have looked like if Lorne Michaels' early experiments with the Muppets on his revolutionary '70s sketch show had clicked with audiences in the way that Chevy Chase, Gilda Radner, and John Belushi did.

Rather than admit defeat and pull the plug on further original Muppets productions for Disney+, the studio went back to the drawing board and bankrolled a new, made-for-streaming movie. The 2021 Halloween-themed special *Muppets Haunted Mansion* featured a crazy quilt of flesh-and-blood celebrities, including Will Arnett, Darren Criss, Taraji P. Henson, and John Stamos.

Released on the streamer on October 8, 2021, *Muppets Haunted Mansion* is a spooky, *Scooby-Doo*–esque comedy centered on Gonzo and Pepe as they attempt to spend a night in, you guessed it, a haunted mansion. Arnett in particular gets into the spirit of the enterprise, seemingly channeling the ghost of Vincent Price as the duo's Ghost Host. Of course, the rest of the gang drops by in various creepy-crawly disguises to scare the wits out of the two scaredy-cats. The 50-minute-long special remains a frightful delight and a staple of scary season.

Opposite: Gonzo, Yvette Nicole Brown, and Pepe the King Prawn in Muppets Haunted Mansion, *(2021). Above: Lilly Singh and Animal in* The Muppets Mayhem *(2023).*

Which brings us to the most recent Muppets streaming exclusive, 2023's *The Muppets Mayhem,* which also happens to be the franchise's most inspired Disney+ creation to date. The show is essentially a Muppets-centric riff on *Behind the Music,* the addictive VH1 rise-and-fall docuseries from the late '90s. *The Muppets Mayhem* chronicles the arc of the wild and wooly Henson house band, Dr. Teeth and the Electric Mayhem, as they recorded their first album. Disney+ initially dropped a binge-able 10-episode batch of the clever, cheeky show on May 10, 2023. *The Muppets Mayhem* would receive six Children's & Family Emmy Awards and end up winning for outstanding children's or family viewing series before the studio threw in the towel.

Looking ahead, the path forward for the franchise seems brighter than ever. According to Leigh Slaughter, vice president of the Muppets Studio and live characters strategy for Walt Disney Imagineering, fans today want the same thing from the Muppets that they've always wanted. "I don't think it's any different," she says. "They want some laughs and a little bit of joy. We're here to make the world a whole lot happier and a little weirder."

To that end, fans may want to start booking their travel plans for next year, because they're about to see a lot more of Kermit and company at Disney's cruise ships and theme parks, including live appearances from the characters on land and sea. But hands down, the biggest attraction will be the gang's first-ever e-ticket amusement-park ride. Slated to open at Walt Disney World in Orlando sometime in 2026, the Rock 'n' Roller Coaster promises to be the ultimate Muppets experience. The paint on the ride isn't dry yet, so Slaughter is a bit guarded about getting into too many specifics, but she teases that it will include a pre-show area where you'll hear from the characters, and a groovy in-ride soundtrack by—who else—Dr. Teeth and the Electric Mayhem. So now, if you'll excuse us, we have to wrap up this story and go online to buy our tickets. See you there! □

Taking the Leap

In 2025, Kermit delivered the commencement speech at the University of Maryland. Here is a brief nugget of his wisdom.

Leaping is kind of something we frogs know a thing or two about. And, uh, judging by the number of you who've leapt into McKeldin Fountain at 2 o'clock in the morning, so do you. You know, when I was just a little bit younger than all of you, I used to have fun in the swamp playing leapfrog. It was our favorite game. Or, kind of our only game. But we loved it. Except for my cousin Albert. He never actually leapt. He just stepped on your back and used your head like a lily pad. Sure, he got ahead, but it was only by stepping on you. We've been told that that's how you succeed. And some choose to believe it. But I know they're wrong. So as you prepare to take this big leap into real life, here's a little advice, if you're willing to listen to a frog. Rather than jumping over someone to get what you want, consider reaching out your hand and taking the leap side by side.

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The Muppets

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IN HER OWN WORDS

Miss Piggy

"There is only one gift you should accept on your first date—diamonds."

••••

"I am waiting for a really strong and meaningful female pig role."

••••

"Moi has always possessed a charm that is lethal to men."

••••

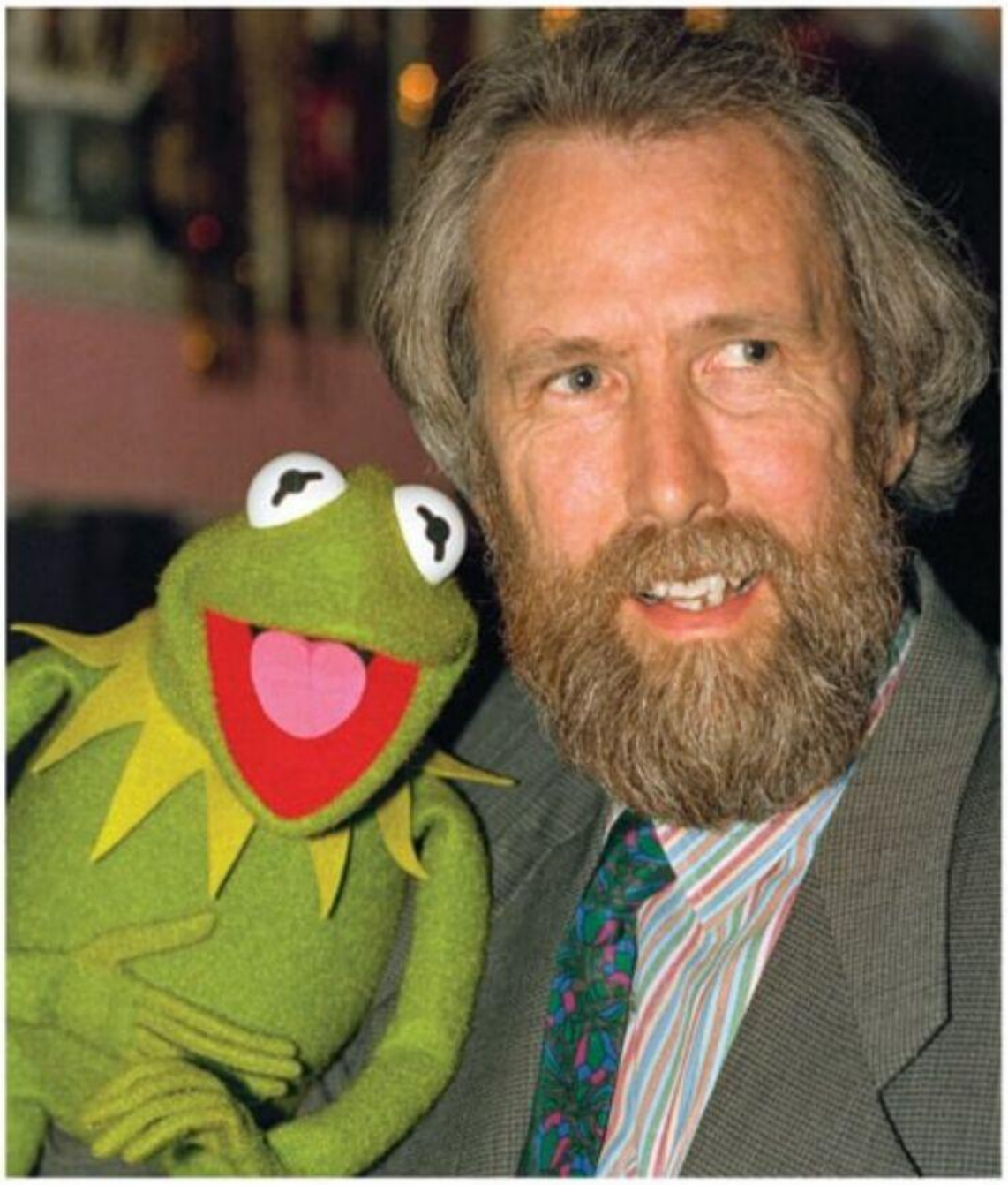
"I am a pig, and as a pig, I have always stood out."

••••

"The early bird gets the worm—which is what he deserves."

••••

"This, you see, is my ultimate ambition—to live a simple life with the frog I love."

A MARVELOUS MENAGERIE

Seventy years after Kermit sprang from the mind and hands of Jim Henson and into the public arena, the frog and his Muppet ilk have made a beautiful mark—delighting in various milieus, delivering words of wisdom, and, in their playful madness, providing a touch of calm and levity for us all.